

TRANSITIONAL EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN STUDENTS STUDYING IN BEIJING, CHINA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the transitional experiences of African international students studying in Beijing, China. It was expected that an exploration of what students go through in their transitional process would help university student affairs personnel in the provision of effective services to the students. The study was qualitative in nature and employed a phenomenological study design which involved interviewing African students and also personnel from the student support department at one of the universities in Beijing. It was found that African international students are mainly grappling with issues of language, food, culture and the education system in their new environment. It was also established that technology, Chinese lessons, and local friends are particularly useful in helping them with transition. However, the study has shown that African students do not make effective use of the support services that are available at the university. Therefore the study recommends strong integration and interaction between Chinese students and African international students as a way of helping them to ease their transition difficulties. It is also recommended that the student services department should put in place measures to ensure that students are fully making use of the services.

Keywords: Transition; Experiences; Support services; Culture.

INTRODUCTION

For the past 10-15 years, the number of students studying abroad worldwide has significantly increased. In 2011 the number of students studying abroad was estimated at about 3.3million (Wadhwa & Jha, 2014). This number is projected to grow to 8 million by the year 2020 (Night, 2004). Of this number, China hosts a little less than 10% of all international students, and this figure is also likely to rise in the near future due to improved Chinese university rankings (Onsman, 2013). With this trend, the number of African students going abroad to study in China has also significantly increased. Most African students are going to China for their studies because of China's fast-growing economy and warmer ties with Africa. Figures from China's Ministry of Education showed that 3,737 African students went to study in Chinese universities in 2007. In 2009, there were more than 12,436 students from Africa and by the end of 2013; more than 35,000 Africans were studying in China (Onsman, 2013). Most of these African students have never before been in other countries other than their own. Unlike other African students going to study in such countries as UK, America and Australia, African students going to study in China are likely to experience greater challenges. It would be presumed so because most part of Africa was colonized by the Europeans with whom they share some common characteristic especially in terms of language. However, with China's unique culture and language, African students are likely to go through difficult acclimatizing experiences for them to get used to their new environment. Even in such difficulties they are required to successfully transition through these experiences if they are to achieve their desired goal. As Quan, Smailes, and Fraser, (2012) have asserted, a smooth transition is crucial for students since it has an important influence on their social life and academic

performances. However, according to Adelm (1999) among other things, making a successful transition and adjustment to college for students is not as easy as one would assume since it is affected by several factors.

THE CONCEPT OF TRANSITION

Despite the fact that entrance to college is a joyous moment for students, the transition process for international students is a stressful life event (Terenzini, et al., 1994) and an exceedingly complex phenomenon. During this period, students experience adjustment strains within their host environment that are unique and particularly stressing to them. First-year students are particularly at risk as they face a number of new stressors during the transition period of starting a new life in college. However for all students, the key transition involves adaptation to a new set of academic and social systems (Terenzini, et al., 1994). Transition generally indicates the progression from the familiar to the unknown and involves the adoption of new cultural, social and cognitive challenges (Prescott & Hellsten, as cited in Menzies & Baron, 2014). Goodman et al (2006) defined transition as any event or nonevent that results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions and roles. Transition is also seen as a psychological process which people go through to come to terms with a new situation (Bridges, 1991). These definitions suggest that transition is a period that involves a process in which one has to go to terms with the unknown in order to survive as a social being in the new situation.

There are several factors that are related to transition and several theories have been developed to understand transition (Evans, et al., 2010). Some of these factors include language barrier, culture shock, adaptation, acculturation and integration into higher education (Evans, et al., 2010). Research indicates that though they share some transitional issues with domestic students, international students are more likely to face deeper and more complicated transitional issues due to their foreign status (Hurtado, et al., 1996). Further, one would assume that African international students would be in a more complicated situation than the other international students because of some factors and issues that make them unique when compared with other international students. The impact of colonialism, slavery, and identity, including racism and discrimination and the influence of contextual factors that promote an ongoing state of living in uncertainty have been outlined as three distinct issues that separate present African international students from various other groups of international students (Briggss, et al., 2012).

Developing an understanding of unique transitional issues they face is therefore crucial in developing effective support systems or services. Nonetheless, the organizational and interpersonal dynamics, mechanisms and processes through which students make transitions from work or high school to college have gone largely unexplored (Terenzini, et al., 1994). The field has largely been under conceptualized, and research into the process is mainly small scale (Briggss, et al., 2012) such that many times transition experiences of international students go unnoticed. The purpose of the paper is therefore to uncover the academic and social transitional experiences of first year African graduate students studying in Beijing, China. Specifically the following questions are explored: What are the experiences that African students go through after they get enrolled at the university? What are the coping strategies that help them successfully transition through this period? Whether and how do university students support services help them with their transition? It is envisaged that an in-depth understanding of students' experiences of transition would help the student affairs personnel at the university to manage and support students effectively.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach using phenomenological design to understand the transitional experiences of African international students studying in Beijing, China. Phenomenology as a research design advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value; and one which sees behaviour as determined by the phenomena of experience rather than by external objective and physical described reality (Cohen, et al., 2007). As such, the use of this research design helped to generate well informed data about the experiences of African students. Data for the study were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussion. Interviews are best used as a tool on a set of people who had experienced the phenomenon. This method is flexible and allowed multi-sensory channels to be used such as non verbal cues. Interviews also gave room for probing, question clarification and answer clarification. As for the focus group discussions, participants were allowed to participate in the discussion where the topic of transition was introduced. Guiding questions were developed and participants were controlled to remain within the course of the topic. Based on this topic, students shared their stories about their transitions and how they cope with them.

The interviews were conducted with six first year graduate students and one staff from the student affairs department of the university. All the students who were interviewed also took part in the focus group discussion. Only first year students were targeted because it was believed that at the time of the research they were still trying to settle in the new environment and as such they would easily voice the experiences they were going through. The collection of information from different participants and using different methods ensured credibility of the data gathered through triangulation as discussed by Maxwell, (2009). The study used convenience and purposive sampling techniques to identify the research participants. Convenience sampling was used to select African international students where those who were within reach of the researchers were enrolled into the research as long as they were in first year and agreed to take part in the research. Purposive sampling was used to identify the student affairs professional. According to Cohen, et al., (2007, purposive sampling is used in order to access knowledgeable people, those who have in-depth knowledge about particular issues by virtue of their professional role, power, and access to networks, expertise or experience.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses some of the key findings of the study which explored the transitional experiences of African international students at one of the universities in Beijing, China. The section has been divided into three parts where part one looks at the student experiences, part two covers coping mechanisms and the last part discusses the role of the university in student transition.

Part One – Student Experiences **Language**

It was found that African international student's transitional experiences are mostly based on language problems. Language is a major tool for communication and it defines one's identity. For one to be fully integrated into other people's culture, one must understand their language. Language is however a stumbling blocks for participants to be fully integrated into the

Chinese society so that they actively participate in all necessary activities affecting their life. In this study all participants unanimously stated that language is a major concern for them as they continue to stay in China. The participants expressed their frustrations with language difficulties which they experienced with bank staff when conducting transactions, university staff in dormitories and other offices and even in shops. They noted that even in international students dormitories, posters and memos were written in Chinese and this posed a lot of problems for them to get the information. Some of the participants also indicated that sometimes they are unwilling to attend certain university functions and activities because they are conducted in Chinese only.

The other issue on language was raised in relation to the interaction between the students and some Chinese professors. It was also often mentioned that understanding the accent of some Chinese professors is challenging. On the other hand it is difficult for some Chinese professors to understand the English accent of some African students. This was found to be a problem which sometimes could affect the students' understanding of the subject content. At the same time failure for a professor to understand what a student is saying leads into frustration on the part of the student. As such, the quality of learning could be negatively affected. This finding confirms Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton and Renn, (2010) who indicated that international students face several transitional challenges, one of which is language. According to the Schlosberg theory this is the 'Moving in' stage where people moving into a situation need to familiarize themselves with the rules, norms, and expectations of the new system (Goodman, et al., 2006), and language plays a greater role in acquiring those things.

Cultural Differences

Culture plays a very vital role in peoples' lives and in this paper culture refers to ways of living and conducting oneself. The study has established that African students are experiencing cultures which are quite different from their own. One of the issues which came up about culture was the idea of sharing a bed room with someone from a different cultural background. The respondents noted that in most cases there were incidents of conflicts and misunderstandings between roommates, especially in situations where an African student was paired with someone outside Africa. Most of the misunderstandings were culturally related where for example an African student would allow his or her friends to visit any time they want while the roommate's culture would not allow that. This finding is consistent with previous findings regarding student problems in different cultures. For example Nassim, (2011) stated that international students face the reality that they have to cope with culture that is very different from their own, creating more difficulties during their social adjustment.

Additionally, most participants observed that Chinese people keep social distance and do not seem to be willing to interact with African and other international students. Examples were given of Chinese people who were not willing to sit close to an African student in public transport or in student canteens. Some of the respondents interpreted this as discrimination. This line of thinking could be attributed to the African hangover from a long and complex history of colonialism, international humiliation through slavery which heightens the feeling of inferiority (Briggss, et al., 2012). However one would also look at it from a cultural perspective where it may be difficult for Chinese people to just open up to total strangers. This closed culture could make it very difficult for them to instantly integrate with other people from other cultures. At the same time it should be stressed that all international students and especially those from Africa seriously need people and students from the host

country to help them successfully get through the transition period. This is especially important because international students feel a sudden loss of support from friends, family and other loved ones and this intensifies their feelings of homesickness (Nassim, 2011). Integrating with African students on the part of their Chinese counterparts is very valuable to the former's process of transition as argued by Smart and Paulsen, (2012) who highlight the importance of social networking to the adjustment to new environments.

Food

It is a well known fact that each country has its specific types of food unique to itself. Similarly Chinese food is different from all home countries of participants. Most of them stated that some of the food which is served in the students' canteen seem unfamiliar to them in terms of taste and other characteristics. They therefore argued that most of the time they prepare their own food rather than using the canteens available. However, even if they make the decision to buy and cook their own food, in most cases it is difficult for them to find what they are looking for in the super markets because some African food stuff may not be available in China. They noted that such a situation may affect their health. Some of the respondents suggested that the university should start providing some African meals in the canteens as most of the time they spend preparing food rather than spending their time on academics. With an African canteen available, time that is used for buying and preparing foodstuffs would be used for academic purposes. However, some of the respondents indicated that they were slowly getting used to the Chinese food.

Education System

Most African students are used to a different type of education and a different way of doing academic activities to what they are experiencing in China. The respondents indicated that they generally found the education environment different from what they are used to. They raised one important issue in relation to how academic activities are conducted. Most of them highlighted the use of class presentations in most of their courses using technology which some may not be familiar with. They indicated that this gives them a lot of pressure in that they are required to do some form of research on topics and make class presentations on the same. They noted that this was not only stressful but also hard work because after the presentations they are also supposed to submit end of semester papers. Most of them indicated that they would rather write examinations than researching and making presentations.

However, one would argue that at graduate level, students always do a lot of reading, researching and presenting. Therefore the idea of having examinations could be due to the fact that most of the interviewees were doing their Masters Degree and had just finished their Bachelors Degree where most of the learning and assessment was based on examinations. However, it should be noted that this finding is consistent with a study in the USA which found that many international students experience an educational system that is different to their own native countries especially in relation to ways of learning (Nassim, 2011). In spite of these difficulties, most participants found the academic departments to be very organized and their lecturers to be very friendly and understanding thus making it much easier for them to navigate through.

Part Two-Coping Strategies

In the face of difficulties, problems and challenges, it is only natural for one to develop strategies which could help them to cope with what they are going through. This is also the case with the African students who have devised their own ways of going through the transition. This section discusses some of the strategies.

Technology

Technology was found to be the most popular strategy that is used to cope with some of the challenges that African students meet in their period of transition. All the respondents indicated that the mobile phone is a major source of support to their daily activities. The study has established that the students can use the phone for virtually anything including communicating with Chinese friends through We chat messaging platform which has a translation facility. They are also able to make use of map applications on their phones to identify places around. Another piece of technology that was found to be very useful for the students was the computer which has translation facilities provided by Bing and other service providers. These translation services are mainly used to translate university communication which could be in Chinese and they also use them when buying goods from online shops. A calculator was also one of the popular pieces of technology that proved useful to the respondents when shopping and negotiating prices for goods. This is part of the Self in Schlossberg theory where the respondents are using their inner self and take charge of the situations by using technology as a strategy for their survival (Power 2010).

Peer Support: Chinese Friends

Although generally the study has found that it is difficult for African students to integrate with their Chinese counterparts, the respondents indicated that some of their Chinese colleagues were very helpful especially with Chinese language translation. It was reported that some African students have Chinese friends who help them with translation which makes it easier to move around and buy things. Such interaction was found to be a win-win situation where the Chinese students too were interested in learning and practicing their English skills. Such interaction was very beneficial to the African students and its absence would significantly disadvantage them. This finding seems to be inconsistent with a study of international students in the United Kingdom which found that lack of local friends does not disadvantage international students (Kashyap, 2010). The reason might be that language is not a big problem for international students in the United Kingdom. In China, interaction and relationships of international students with local students seems to help them easily navigate especially that language is a big challenge.

Peer Support: Fellow International Students

There were also those participants who stated that they spend most of their time with their fellow international student friends especially country mates. The participants argued that Chinese people are not very open and interactive. They stated that if the Chinese were friendly enough they would have made them their friends and interact with them so that they learn from each other. This finding confirms Nassim, (2011) who argued that establishing social network with their domestic counterparts is sometimes hard to achieve for international students due to negative attitudes by the local students towards the international students, relative lack of sensitivity by local students to cultural differences and the international students' own isolation as foreigners. These findings are also consistent with a study of international students in the United Kingdom which showed that international student

communities provide substantial academic and social support among themselves (Kashyap, 2010).

Family Support

Three of the participants argued that they have siblings at the university who have been able to provide support and help familiarize with places around the institution and beyond. Most siblings came earlier and have made several friends. These participants argued that they get the advantage and befriend their sibling's friends hence making it even easier to navigate around the institutions and psychologically being available to them as social beings. This finding is consistent with Schlossberg theory which states that support comes from intimate relationship, family units, network of friends, and institutions and communities (Goodman, et al., 2006). Therefore family support is crucial for international students to cope with the new environment. However, in case where first year students do not have siblings around, it is very difficult to get used. As such they have to explore other alternatives such as befriending Chinese students or fellow international students.

Part Three-The Role Of The University In Students' Transitioning Process Support Services

The study has found that there are a number of initiatives that the university put in place in order to make the students' transition process bearable. An interview with the student affairs professional indicated that the institution provides several support services to ensure that students are not stressed up. The professional outlined several services available to first year students such as orientation programs, ice breaking, counselling, among others. However, there were mixed reactions from participants when asked whether these programs help them with their transitioning. Some students felt the programs are helpful since they provide a platform where they are able to build social networks and help each other thereafter. Others however felt most of the programs are meant for general international students who face a common problem hence do not have a significant impact on their transitioning. Some participants went on to say that they are not able to use some of the services because they do not know that they exist. It was also noted that in their home countries, most of these services are not provided hence difficult to utilize them now because they do not know the purposes of such services. This confirms previous studies that many international students underutilize the institutional support available to them (Nassim, 2011). This is particularly true to African students who in their countries, support services are not provided due to lack of financial capacity to provide such services. As such, utilizing such programs proves difficult. It is therefore imperative that student affairs personnel disseminate the information to international students and the importance of utilizing such programs for their own benefit.

Chinese Lessons

The study also established that there are Chinese lessons that are provided to the students for free. These were found to be very important for African international student's adaptation. Those participants who enrolled in the Chinese classes stated that the classes helped them to grasp some of the important simple vocabulary that is helpful for daily communication. They suggested that having more of similar classes would help them to use the language even if it is at elementary level. Participants also indicated that these lessons are not only helping with their social life, but also with academic life as they use some of these Chinese language skills to communicate with Chinese people especially when conducting their min research when

writing their term papers. In relation to the issue of language, the study also found that all the programmes at the university have a subject that deals with Chinese culture where students are taught some of the cultural aspects of the Chinese society in relation to the students' programmes of study. Such subjects are also useful in that they help to understand some significant cultural aspects of the Chinese people.

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to understand the transitional experiences of African students in Beijing, China. The results show that the transition process for most African international students is mostly affected by language problems. Language is a limiting factor for them to be fully integrated into the Chinese environment. Language was also a limiting factor for the students in using some academic services at the institution such as the library hence affecting their academic life. It has also been found that other factors such as different food, culture, education system are equally affecting their life as they were found to be different from their home countries. The study has also found that technology is the major support strategy that African international students use to cope with the environment in China. All participants in the study mentioned the use of the phone as a major tool in helping them navigate successfully around China. Other strategies involve making of friends, especially local friends, and international students alike especially those from their home countries.

Finally, the study recommends that rather than wait for the Chinese students and people to do something to help African and other international students in their transition, they should take responsibility for their own transition by taking a leading role in the process. For example, instead of waiting for the Chinese students to start friendships with them, they could be the ones to initiate such interactions. Failure to be proactive on their part would only help to exacerbate their situation and alienate them further in their new environment. On the other hand, the student support services department should make sure that all its services are well publicized to everyone and that all international students should be encouraged to make use of the services.

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