

Mixed Methods Research Proposal:

Supporting International Students

Veronica O'Neill

New Jersey City University

Mixed Methods Research Proposal: Supporting International Students

Chapter 1**Introduction**

In the 2015/16 academic year, 1,043,838 international students studied at colleges and universities in the United States. During the same period, 5.2% of all U. S. higher education students were international students (Institute of International Education, 2016a). Just five years prior, there were 723,277 international students studying in the United States. This represents a 44% increase in five years (Institute of International Education, 2016b). These students represent a significant source of income for U. S. universities. Given the increasing number of international students studying outside their home country, and the competition between countries to attract these students, it would benefit U. S. universities to develop enhanced support structures for international students (Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011).

In addition to the financial aspects of hosting international students, these students bring diversity to the university. In today's global economy, giving students in the host country the opportunity to interact with peers from different cultures can be a great benefit (Dalglish, Haker, Lawson, Nelson & Reese, 2011).

International students who come to the United States experience many challenges. For many, the English language is difficult, so communicating with peers can be a problem. Students experience loneliness and homesickness, and miss their own food and culture (Gautam, Lowery, Mays & Durant, 2016).

Technology is often seen as a factor that enhances students' engagement and satisfaction, but that may not always be the case for international students. For example, Habib, Johannesen and Ogrim (2014) note that the use of technology can put international students at a

disadvantage, as they may not be strong in reading and writing in English. They caution professors that the techniques that are effective for American students may be beyond what international students are prepared to handle (Habib, Johannesen & Ogrim, 2014).

Statement of the Problem

Universities in the United States welcome international students in increasing numbers each year. These students bring a global perspective to the university community. However, they also experience challenges in adapting to American teaching techniques, and feelings of loneliness and homesickness. They miss the culture and food of their home country. In general, universities have some sort of orientation program for new international students, but research suggests that these supporting efforts must continue throughout the international students' time at the university (Gautam, Lowery, Mays & Durant, 2016). Professors must also be aware of the special needs of international students, to ensure that they can perform optimally and benefit from the experience of studying in the United States.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of international students at an urban, public university in the northeastern United States. A mixed methods research design will be used to identify themes in an initial qualitative phase with a small sample of 15 to 20 international students. These themes will be tested in a subsequent quantitative phase involving a survey distributed to all international students at the target university. Ultimately, the results of this study will be used to develop new, evidence-based programs to enhance the experience of international students at the university.

This study is important because there is intense competition among U. S. universities to host international students. To continue to attract international students, universities must ensure

that they are meeting these students' educational needs, as well as their social and cultural needs. Hearing these students' authentic voices will assist the university in this endeavor.

Research Questions

This study will focus on three major questions:

1. What are the experiences of international students at an urban public university?
2. What challenges do international students face at an urban public university?
3. What technological and social support can the university provide to assist international students in adjusting to life in their host country?

Limitations

This study is limited to a single, urban, public university. As such, the findings may not be applicable to other universities. The study will be conducted in English, which may not be the native language of the participants. The qualitative phase of the study is dependent on analysis by the researcher, and the researcher's bias may impact the qualitative findings. The transcripts of the interviews in the qualitative phase will be sent to the study participants, so they can member check the responses. In addition, a qualitative data analysis program will be used to analyze the transcripts, to assist in the development of themes.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The number of international students choosing to study in the United States has increased steadily, over 44% in the past 5 years (Institute of International Education, 2016b). International students represent a significant percentage of students enrolled at U. S. universities, and there is considerable competition between countries to attract international students. International

students have unique needs and challenges, and these issues must be considered if a university is to attract these students.

Several studies have been conducted to try to understand the challenges faced by international students. These challenges include difficulties with the English language, loneliness and homesickness, and financial difficulties. Students must adjust to a different culture, and may have trouble finding food from home and a house of worship. Educational techniques may also differ from the techniques familiar to the international student. Several of these studies are reviewed below, to understand the existing knowledge base in this area.

Review of Relevant Studies

Gautam, Lowery, Mays and Durant (2016) examined the challenges of international students attending a university in a small town in the United States. Their qualitative study began with an online survey sent to all 110 international students, and 28 of those students responded to the survey. Of those, six students were selected to participate in in-depth interviews. These students were purposefully selected to represent different parts of the world, and different religious, social and cultural backgrounds. Both graduate and undergraduate students were included in the sample. The students were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure their authentic voice was captured. The resulting data was analyzed using NVivo software, to identify themes. The study was limited by its small sample size, and because the data collection was completed exclusively in English, which was not the native language of the respondents. The respondents identified challenges in living in a small city, such as the lack of transportation and financial difficulties. Another theme was social, cultural and religious issues. Respondents who participated in social activities through the university international office were generally satisfied with the opportunities, while others felt the international office

could do a better job helping students find work. The respondents all felt that the English language was a significant challenge to them (Gautam, Lowery, Mays & Durant, 2016).

Kwadzo (2014) also studied international students and their experiences both in school and at work. He conducted a qualitative study of 20 international students who studied and worked at a Northeastern public university. The students were chosen through purposeful sampling, using a snowball technique. The researcher recruited four participants, who then helped the researcher reach the desired sample size. The study was conducted through face-to-face interviews, using a semi-structured approach. In addition, each participant was given a disposable camera, and asked to take 10 photos that told of their experiences studying and working in the United States. The students were asked to discuss these photo essays at the time of the interviews. The themes that emerged from the data included the students' reasons for working, what type of work they did, the impact of this work on their lives, culture shock, and how the student coped with these situations. The study is limited by the nature of analysis of the qualitative data, but the research sought to minimize this impact by allowing the participants to review the transcribed data. Triangulation was also used to increase the validity of the data. One of the major findings of the study was that students who worked at the university, such as graduate assistants, were satisfied that their professional experiences were enhanced by this work. However, most of the students were limited to working in manual labor-intensive areas, such as dining halls. Some of these students reported that their English improved because of interactions with other students on the job. Many students reported stress, tiredness, and homesickness. The researcher suggested that the university should develop more programs to help students adjust to their new environment and cope with culture shock (Kwadzo, 2014).

Sleeman, Lang and Lemon (2016) conducted a systematic review of the literature regarding social media use by international students, both personal and educational. They looked at peer-reviewed studies published during the last 10 years. They found that international students often use social media to keep in touch with friends and family in their home country, and that this attachment helps the student adapt to the culture overseas. These bridges to the home country and the overseas country were positively related to better academic performance. They also found that participating in social media activities enhanced the international students' confidence in using English. Social media can also build boundaries, as students choose familiar social networks based in their home country. The literature also showed that international students often use social media such as blogs to discuss their adjustment to their host country with others from their home country. It was noted that these blogs often include hybridized use of both host and home languages, and that the movement between languages was quite fluid. The study also looked at social media in educational settings, and found that this use can disadvantage international students who are not fluent in English. The use of discussion forums may also be an unnatural method for international students. On the other hand, some students noted that they were more confident in asynchronous forums, which gave them time to understand the communication and craft a response. The discussion forum can also mitigate cultural issues such as gender or religion. This study was limited by the use of specific search terms in the identification of articles to be considered. The social media realm is constantly changing, and additional research is needed to address how international students exist in social media networks in both their home and host countries (Sleeman, Lang and Lemon, 2016).

Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim and LaRose (2011) studied how international students use social networking to keep in touch with friends and family at home, and in the United States. The

researchers conducted a quantitative study of international students at a large Midwestern university. The survey was sent to all international students, and 343 responses, or 8.14% responded. After adjusting for partial responses, the data set represented 195 students. These students were both undergraduate and graduate students, with students from Asia, the Mid-East, and Europe represented. The researchers examined how Facebook usage, culture and the student's personality related to social capital and ability to adjust. The study looked at both bridging social capital, which consists of loose ties that help a person connect to a new network, and bonding social capital, which involves strong ties such as family and close friends. Facebook usage was related positively with increases in the students' online bridging capital. The study also found that extroverts may benefit from developing online social capital by using Facebook. The study also found that social adjustment of international students was enhanced by interactions on Facebook with American students and locals. This study was limited by a low response rate, and because it focused only on online activity. Students' offline activity could have a major impact on social capital and adjustment. The study also focused only on Facebook, while many students use analogous social networking sites from their own countries (Lin, Peng, Kim, Kim & LaRose, 2011).

Saw, Abbott, Donaghey and McDonald (2012) also studied social media use by international students. They studied international students who were studying at a university in Australia, and how the librarians at the university use social media to communicate and engage with international students. They distributed a survey to domestic and international students, and received 575 responses, which was a 13% response rate. The survey found that 514 of the 575 respondents had a Facebook account, but many of the respondents did not use that account regularly. Most students used social media for staying in touch with family and friends, and 60%

reported that they use Facebook to share information. 91% reported that they use Facebook for educational purposes. Chinese students were twice as likely to use Renren as their preferred social media platform as Facebook. The study also found significant usage of YouTube and Twitter by international students. The study concluded that social media is important for engaging international students, but that the country of origin of the student may lead the university to consider expanding their social media presence to other platforms, such as Renren. The study had some limitations, including a relatively small response rate. Only 31% of the respondents were international students, and over 2/3 of the respondents were female. There were 39 countries represented in the respondents, with only a few countries having significant response rates. While it was not possible to determine the preferred social media sites for each country, the need to consider other social media networks such as Renren was clear (Saw, Abbott, Donaghey & McDonald, 2012).

Summary

The existing literature focuses on international students and their challenges in living in a host country. These challenges range from difficulty with the English language, to loneliness and homesickness, to culture shock. International students often must work to help support themselves, and they must deal with work-related stresses. They use technology to keep in touch with family and friends at home, as well as with new friends in the host country. They also need to deal with educational technologies that are new to them. A recurrent theme throughout the studies reviewed indicated that universities can have an important role in helping their international students adjust to their host country, and deal with these challenges.

Chapter 3

Introduction

The study proposed in this document will be a mixed methods study using an exploratory design. Creswell and Plano Clark (2010) explain that this design as begins with qualitative data collection and analysis, yielding qualitative results. These results are used to create variables and instruments, which are used during the subsequent quantitative phase. Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006) state that this sequential mixed methods design permits the researcher to address some issues found in the existing literature, and then add to the knowledge base in the next stage of the research.

The study is inspired by the work of Gautem, Lowery, Mays and Durant (2016), who identified challenges faced by international students attending a small-town university. There were several issues identified in this study that may not be a significant factor in a large urban area. For example, one challenge faced by international students in the small town was transportation, to shopping and around town. This may not be a significant problem for students at the urban university, as there are several connections to buses and trains nearby. Additionally, the city is located in a prime location, minutes by public transportation to New York City, and on the Northeast Corridor train line, serving Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington, D. C. There is also a major airport nearby, which is accessible by public transportation. Many choices for shopping and cultural activities are easily reachable by public transportation as well.

Another theme that was developed in the Gautem, Lowery, Mays and Durant (2016) study was cultural and religious isolation. This may not be as significant for students at the target university for this study, because the urban area is quite diverse, and the proximity to New York City, with its many ethnic neighborhoods, may help provide a taste of home to students. Houses

of worship for persons of many faiths are also available in the immediate area or a few minutes away in New York City.

This study will seek to listen to the authentic voices of international students in an urban, public university, and to discover their challenges. Unlike the Gautem, Lowery, Mays and Durant (2016) study, it will begin with a qualitative phase with a small, purposeful sample, to identify themes. A quantitative phase, a survey distributed to all international students at the university, will test if the themes developed in the qualitative study can be generalized to all international students at the university. This approach may assist the university in obtaining funding for creating programs to assist international students as they study in the United States.

Research Design

The study will use an exploratory mixed methods design. In this design, there is a qualitative phase, which will consist of semi-structured in-person interviews with 15 to 20 international students at the university. This will ensure that the same questions are asked of each participant, but will allow the interviewer the flexibility to explore responses further as needed.

The themes identified in the qualitative phase will be used to describe a quantitative survey instrument, which will be distributed to all international students at the target university. The results of this phase will demonstrate if the qualitative findings can be generalized to the full population. In this study, the qualitative results will take precedence, and the quantitative results will be used to generalize the qualitative findings.

This study will focus on three major questions:

1. What are the experiences of international students at an urban public university?
2. What challenges do international students face at an urban public university?

3. What technological and social support can the university provide to assist international students in adjusting to life in their host country?

Population and Sample

The population for this study is all international students currently studying at an urban, public university in the Northeastern United States. A purposeful sampling method was chosen for the qualitative phase of this study, to ensure that the voices of students from different countries and backgrounds were included in the development of themes. After the completion of the qualitative phase, a survey exploring the themes will be distributed to all international students at the target university, to determine if the qualitative results can be generalized to the entire population.

Procedures

To complete this study, the following procedures will be used:

- The proposal for the study will be submitted to the Institutional Review Board for approval.
- With the assistance of the university's International Office, candidates will be identified for the qualitative phase of the study. These students, representing each of the major sending countries at the university, will be invited to participate in the study. This selection will continue until the desired sample of 15 to 20 students has agreed to participate in the study.
- Each participant will be given an informed consent document explaining the study and the handling of their personal information and responses. A sample of this document is attached as Appendix A.

- Each participant will be interviewed individually in-person using a semi-structured interview format. This will ensure that all participants are asked the same questions, while allowing the interviewer to explore responses as needed. The interviews will be recorded for further analysis. A sample of the interview questions is attached in Appendix B.
- The audio files from the interviews will be transcribed, and the transcripts will be presented to the participant for review. This will ensure that the transcript accurately reflects the participant's experiences.
- The transcripts will be read and analyzed by the researcher to begin to detect themes and patterns in the responses.
- The transcripts will also be analyzed using qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo. This will help to eliminate researcher bias in the analysis of the data.
- After all themes have been identified, a quantitative survey instrument will be designed and tested.
- This survey will be distributed to all international students at the target university. The first page of the survey will be an informed consent document, explaining the study and how the participant's responses will be handled.
- The quantitative data will be analyzed and compared to the results from the qualitative phase. If the results of the two phases align, the findings may be generalized to the entire population at the target university.

Conclusion

The completion of this study will provide insights into the lives and experiences of international students at an urban, public university in the Northeastern United States. The

challenges these students face, and support systems that could potentially help them address those challenges, will be discussed, with the hope that those support systems can become a reality and enhance the international students' educational experience.

References

- Creswell, J. & Plano Clark, V. (2010). *Designing and Conducting Mixed Methods Research*, 2nd Edition. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications
- Dalglish, C., Haker, C., Lawson, L., Nelson, P., & Reese, M. (2011). Preparing students for international study - the use of technology. *Journal of International Business Education*, 6, 163-173. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1021977667?accountid=12793>
- Erichsen, E. A., & Bolliger, D. U. (2011). Towards understanding international graduate student isolation in traditional and online environments. *Educational Technology, Research and Development*, 59(3), 309-326. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/867411943?accountid=12793>
- Gautam, C., Lowery, C. L., Mays, C., & Durant, D. (2016). Challenges for global learners: A qualitative study of the concerns and difficulties of international students. *Journal of International Students*, 6(2), 501-526. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1779422430?accountid=12793>
- Habib, L., Johannesen, M., & Ogrim, L. (2014). Experiences and challenges of international students in technology-rich learning environments. *Educational Technology & Society*, 17(2), 196+. Retrieved from <http://draweb.njcu.edu:2048/login?url=http://draweb.njcu.edu:2165/ps/i.do?p=AONE&sw=w&u=jers45639&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA374101886&sid=summon&asid=db50e9ad1e6678da5b2f30f5c1cee5c9>

Institute of International Education (2016a). International student data. *Open Doors 2016*.

Retrieved from <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors/Fact-Sheets-and-Infographics/Infographics/International-Student-Data>

Institute of International Education. (2016b). International Student Enrollment Trends, 1948/49-2015/16. *Open Doors Report on International Educational Exchange*. Retrieved from <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>

Kwadzo, M. (2014). International students' experience of studying and working at a northeastern public university in the US. *Journal of International Students*, 4(3), 279-291. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1776144348?accountid=12793>

Lin, J. H., Peng, W., Kim, M., Kim, S. Y. and LaRose, K. (2011). Social networking and adjustments among international students. *New Media & Society* 14 (3) 421 - 440
doi: 10.1177/1461444811418627

Saw, G., Abbott, W., Donaghey, J., & McDonald, C. (2013). Social media for international students - it's not all about Facebook. *Library Management*, 34(3), 156-174.
doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/01435121311310860>

Sleeman, J., Lang, C. and Lemon, N. (2016) Social Media Challenges and Affordances for *International Students Journal of Studies in International Education* 20(5) 391 - 415
Doi: 10.1177/1028315316662975

Teddle, C., & Tashakkori, A. (2006). A general typology of research designs featuring mixed Methods. *Research in the Schools*, 13(1), 12-28. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/210988970?accountid=12793>

Appendix A
Informed Consent

Dear International Student,

I am a doctoral student at New Jersey City University, and am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Christopher Carnahan on the various factors affecting the experiences of international students at your host university.

If you choose to participate, you will be interviewed to determine your experiences and challenges in studying in the United States. The total time commitment to participate in this study should be approximately 1 hour. There are no known risks to participating in this study. The data collected during this study will be held securely for five years. There is no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. Upon completion of the report, a copy of the findings will be sent to you on request. Your participation is voluntary, and greatly appreciated.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please sign the consent form below. If you have any questions, please contact me, Veronica O'Neill, at voneill@njcu.edu.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the NJCU Institutional Review Board.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this project.

I, _____ have read the description of the study, and agree to participate in an interview regarding my experiences as an international student.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Interviewer's signature: _____

Appendix B

Interview Questions

My name is Veronica O’Neill, and I am a doctoral student studying how international students experience living and studying in the United States. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your name will not be attached to your responses, after you have a chance to review them for accuracy. Your identity will be confidential. All documents resulting from this study will be held in a secure location for 5 years, and then will be securely destroyed.

First, I am going to ask you some questions about yourself, and your background:

What country is your home country?

Why did you choose to study in the United States?

Why did you choose to study at this university?

What is your major?

How long have you been in the United States?

Do you enjoy living here?

Do you plan to return to your home country when you complete your studies here?

How would you compare the educational system in your home country to what you have experienced here?

Since you have been in the United States, have you been lonely or homesick?

What have you missed the most about your home country?

What are the biggest challenges you have faced adapting to living and studying in the United States?

Have you participated in the university's American English or English for Business courses?

If you have, did you find the classes helpful?

If you have not, why not?

Do you have a job here in the U. S.?

If yes, what type of work do you do?

Do you enjoy it?

Is your job stressful?

Do you participate in any of the social activities or outings that are offered by the International Student office?

Which activities?

Did you enjoy them?

With respect to your friends at the university, do you have friends

Who are from your home country?

Who are international students from other countries?

Who are American?

Do you use any of the following social media sites?

Facebook

Twitter

Instagram

Snapchat

Blogs

Other:

If you do use social media, what do you use it for?

Keeping in touch with family and friends at home?

Communicating with friends at the university?

Have you had the chance to travel

To New York City

To Philadelphia

To Washington, D. C.

If you did travel, did you enjoy the experience?

If you have not traveled to these locations, would you like to do so?

Can you suggest any services that the university could offer to enhance your experience of studying in the United States?

Can you offer any advice to the international students who might choose to study at this university in the future?

Thank you very much for your responses! Once this interview has been transcribed, you will receive a copy of the transcript to review and correct if necessary. Your help is greatly appreciated!