

Fostering the Academic Transition of International Students Who Are Ethnoculturally and Linguistically Diverse in Postsecondary Education

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Abstract

The need for more services and support for the academic transition of international students is evident as their population continues to increase in postsecondary institutions. There is also need for faculty to have a deeper understanding of how international students transition academically, and how they can use the knowledge to guide academic support development. This phenomenological study examined the personal experience of international students who are Ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse (ECLD) with academic transition to postsecondary education. The focus was on international students with educational backgrounds and experiences outside of Canada and how they adjusted to academic writing and teaching approaches in a Western Canadian university. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with eight purposefully selected international graduate students. A content analysis of related documents from the location of the study was used for data triangulation. All data were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis, resulting in the creation of the following superordinate themes: teaching and learning approaches, challenges, types of support and suggestions for improvement. Findings from this process revealed that disparities in one's social and educational background may conflict and critically affect an international students' academic transition.' The findings brought to bear culturally responsive practices that postsecondary institutions can adopt as they develop programs and academic support services for students. The study also provided recommendations that can be implemented to ensure the smooth transitioning of all international students.

Keywords: Academic Transition, International Students, Postsecondary

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a steady increase in international student enrolment in Canada. Ranked as the third-leading destination of choice for international education (El-Assal, 2020) the country recorded its highest recruitment of over 720,000 international students across all educational levels in 2018 (Government of Canada, 2019). There are now over 220 nations represented amongst the international student population and a large portion of these students are registered in postsecondary institutions (Canadian Bureau for International Education [CBIE], 2018). In addition to the demographic changes, international students have also deeply enriched the learning experience of all students (Sui & Bill, 2014). International students produce and disseminate knowledge (Guo & Chase 2011) by giving global perspectives on classroom discussions (Gold, 2016) and also bring new perspectives to research (Trice, 2003) that serve as a long-term intellectual benefit to their respective institutions. Additionally, their presence allows increased intercultural interactions on the campuses (Sui & Bill, 2014; Trice, 2003).

While the enrollment of international students continues to rise, there is a growing body of literature on academic transitional issues they face in postsecondary institutions. The academic challenges include poor academic writing (Cennetkusu, 2017; Maguire, 2011), conflicting learning and teaching styles (Ding, 2016; Gu et al., 2010; Huang & Klinger, 2006; Keefe & Shi, 2017; Huang & Klinger, 2006; Quan & Sloan, 2016 & Xu, 2015), cultural dissonance (Furnham, 2004; Rientes et al., 2012; Keefe & Shi, 2017 & Kovton, 2010) and language barriers (Ding, 2016; Gu et al., 2010; Huang & Klinger, 2006; Keefe & Shi, 2017; Quan & Sloan, 2016). With these matters in mind, Hughes and Smail (2015) pointed out the need to establish adequate services to address issues concerning *academic transition*. For the purposes of this study, *academic transition* refers to the process of adapting to a new learning environment. Adjusting to a new environment is a multifaceted process which literature has proven to be complex experience for international students.

International students are from diverse ethnocultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds who should not be treated as a homogenous group (Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). Differences in educational experiences, cultural norms and expectations are all factors that significantly affect their adjustment to their new academic environments (Kovton, 2010). Therefore, host institutions should influence the integration of international students (Brunsting, Smith & Zachry, 2018) through faculty functioning as bridge builders, community creators, and facilitators to enhance their learning experience (Gay, 2010). Although postsecondary institutions have restructured pedagogy to assist the academic transition of international students, Bygrave et al. (2014) argue that there are faculty members who are not amply trained to facilitate the diverse learning needs and concerns of the international students. Dimitrov and Haque (2016) agreed with this claim and added that this is because they are inadequately prepared to work with the variety of cultures and languages that have recently joined their classrooms.

Postsecondary leaders, including the instructors and administrators, should be aware of struggles that international students face and how their learning is shaped by their previous experiences (Xu, 2015). Interestingly current literature is silent on how postsecondary leaders should effectively support the academic transition of ECLD international students. It is against this background that this qualitative study explored the learning experiences of international students and the root factors that affect their adjustment to the postsecondary institutions. Focus was on students with educational backgrounds and experiences outside of

Canada and how they adjusted to academic writing and teaching approaches in a university in Western Canada.

The Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework in this study applied Schlossberg et al.'s (1995, 2012) transition theory as a systematic framework for understanding the academic transition of ECLD international students. As illustrated in Figure 1, Schlosberg's (1995) original model framework for transition theory was modified to portray how academic transition for international students occur in three phases (moving in, moving through, and moving on): approaching transitions, the 4 S system (situation, self, support, and strategies), and taking charge. This study supported Schlossberg et al.'s (1995) stance that an in-depth exploration of these three phases will unveil the essence of academic transition.

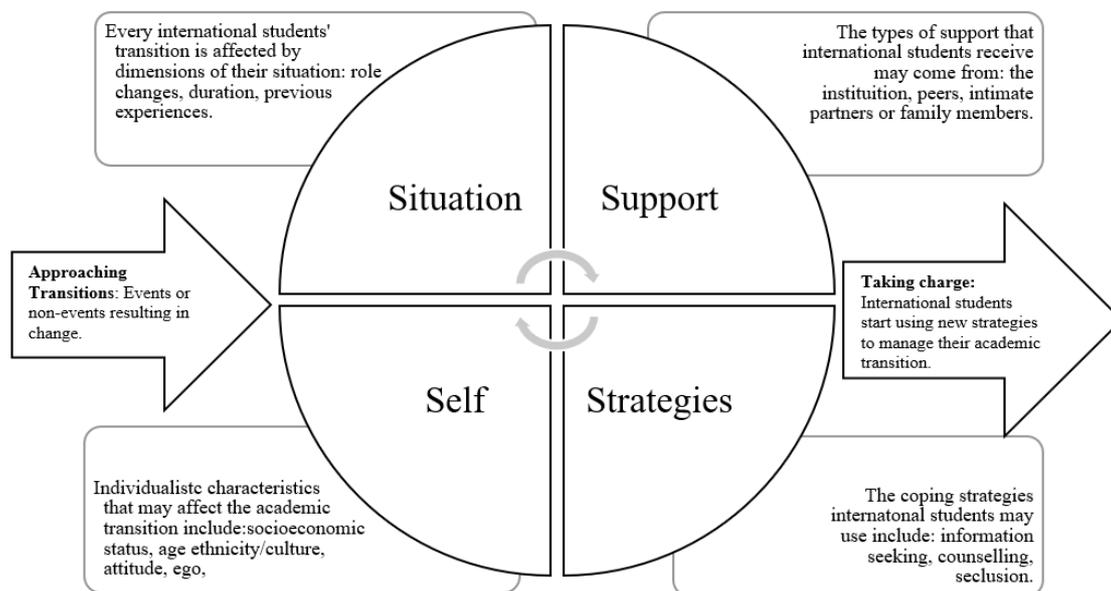


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework: Academic Transition of International Students who are Ethnoculturally and Linguistically Diverse

Methodology

Phenomenology was used as methodological approach for data collection and analysis. Unlike the other research approaches that investigate the development of an event or situation (Mertler, 2019), this phenomenological research strived to describe and deeply interpret intense human experience of a particular phenomenon. For this study, the phenomenon in question, was academic transition- the process of adapting to a new learning environment. By examining in-depth individual experience of ECLD international students', this study analyzed how various participants experienced the phenomenon with the aim of establishing the essence of the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Okoko, 2019).

Eight international graduate students at a western Canadian university were purposefully selected for this study. Four students were enrolled in Masters' programs and the other four students were registered in PhD programs. The participants represented seven countries and three continents: Asia, South America, and Africa. Ten native languages were identified amongst the participants. Six participants had English as a Second Language (ESL), and the

other two were native English speakers. All students completed their previous education up to the undergraduate level in their home countries. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from participants in a university in Western Canada. A content analysis of documentary evidence that explained the phenomenon was also used for data triangulation.

Conclusion

The study provided much-needed insight into the essence of the academic transition of ECLD international students in postsecondary education. Conducting a phenomenological study of this nature, required an in-depth examination of the participants' lived experience to make sense of the academic transition of international students. After a thorough analysis of the data, four themes were discovered that encapsulated commonalities across the participants' stories and unearthed the essence of the academic transition of ECLD international students.

The study revealed academic transition of ECLD international students was intrinsically linked to the following aspects: i) teaching and learning approaches, ii) challenges, iii) types of support and iv) suggestions for improvement.

Teaching and Learning Approaches

It was evident that the influences of previous educational and cultural experiences were central to ECLD international students' academic transition experience. Therefore, adjusting to postsecondary education that had unfamiliar and, in some cases, divergent principles and practices took time and effort. For instance, participants found the teaching and learning approaches in Canada to be more interactive and inclusive as instructors utilized more learner-centred teaching approaches. Instructors would encourage students to participate in open classroom discussions where students would give their perspectives on academic topics, deliver presentations, and contribute to group activities. Aside from class participation, writing was also a significant component of graduate studies. Participants learned how to write with a more authoritative style that displayed critical thinking, had substantive sources, and upheld academic integrity.

Challenges

Experiencing change can also be difficult, as the participants recalled being faced with transitional challenges mainly at the beginning of their programs. Most participants were novice to learner-centred teaching approaches, as their previous schools had more teacher-centred classrooms. Participants explained that in their teacher-centred classroom, the instructor played a more active role; they would present new information to the class, and the student's main role was to listen. Therefore, adjusting to a learning environment where there was an apparent difference in the academic culture was challenging for some participants. The study revealed linguistic, social, and cultural factors that affected the participants' transition.

Types of Support

Over time the participants were fortunate to have access to various avenues of support which helped them overcome their challenges with academic transition. Students received support from the university, peers, and family members; occasionally they also relied on themselves.

Most academic support came from the university, which provided various support services through faculty and student volunteers.

Suggestions for Improvement

Although they held in high regard the level of support they received from the university, it is evident from the findings participants felt there was more they could have done to improve the transitional experience of ECLD international students. Participants suggested that the university elevated transitional support by creating more opportunities for social integration with domestic students, recruiting more experienced student volunteers, enhancing pre-arrival support, introducing mandatory intercultural training for faculty, and improving strategies for teaching multilingual learners. By creating more holistic opportunities for social integration between international and domestic students, universities could dissolve international students' feelings of isolation. Additionally, it creates more cultural awareness among the student population and helps normalize more intercultural activities on school campuses. While it is important to have student volunteers in academic support units, the participants remarked they would have benefited more from other international graduate volunteers. Participants also expressed that the introduction of elevated pre-arrival support could also drastically improve international students' transition to the school environment. By pairing them with other registered students before arrival, they could arrive on campus feeling more prepared and focused on their academic transition.

Participants also voiced that increased enrollment of diverse international groups requires mandatory intercultural training for faculty and staff. This training will improve faculty and staff's understanding of the students' previous learning experiences, and that knowledge will encourage their teaching strategies. Finally, participants appealed for instructors to revamp their teaching strategies for multilingual learners. Using more neutral language and speaking at a slower pace will enhance ESL learners' classroom experience. Overall, the study has met its objectives and has filled a gap in the literature on the academic transition of international students at the postsecondary level. The results of the study confirm useful information for educational practitioners and policymakers to consider when making decisions about supporting international students.

Implications

Findings from the research helped to achieve the study's purpose of examining international students' academic transition in postsecondary institutions. The results also have implications for practice, theory, and future research on the academic transition of international students who are ethnoculturally and linguistically diverse in postsecondary education.

Implication for Practice

With plans to increase the intake of international students at the university, this study has brought to the fore implications for practice. University officials and educators must become more aware of international students' experiences. University officials and educators should start by increasing conversations with international students to learn more about what factors affect their adaption to the learning environment (Perry, 2016). This study proved that an in-depth review of ECLD international students' experience at the university revealed cultural, social, and linguistic factors that affected their academic transition. Gaining insight into international students' experiences will inform the university's decisions around developing

more effective transitional support initiatives. International students bring to the classroom varied learning experiences and expectations. Postsecondary educators should therefore demonstrate pedagogical skills effective for teaching across cultures (Dimitrov & Haque, 2016).

Finally, there should also be mandatory intercultural training for faculty, staff, and students. The training should have a curriculum that explores country-specific cultural backgrounds and discussions on developing inclusive learning and teaching practices. Intercultural training would help the school community to connect with the international students' experiences. The courses would encourage educators and policymakers to evaluate their practices to ensure they are aligned with recommended internationalized principles and procedures. The training should also be a safe space for addressing challenges faced with facilitating intercultural needs and how they can be resolved.

Implication for Theory

Although academic transition differs among international students, Schlossberg et al. (2012) posited that a stable framework would be essential for understanding their experience. Influenced by Schlossberg's (1995, 2012) original transition model, the conceptual framework that examined academic transition by exploring three phases of the learner's transition: approaching transition, the 4 S system and taking charge. According to this study's findings, approaching transition which identifies the nature of the transition being faced, was the international students' process of relocation to Canada for graduate school. As displayed in Figure 2, at the core of the conceptual framework, is the 4' S System (situation, self, support, strategies) which are the factors identified in the findings that directly influenced how the students coped with academic transition; the figure lists a few of the examples given by the students. The final component, taking charge, covered the usage of new strategies used by the participants to cope with academic transition.

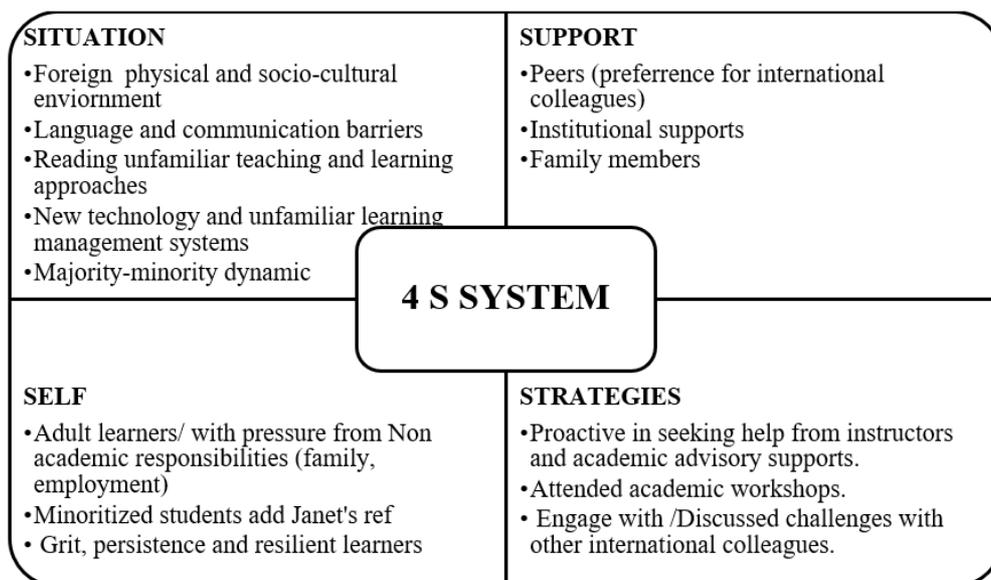


Figure 2: The 4 S System: Factors listed from the Findings

This conceptual framework will promote a more practical way for researchers to examine how international students experience academic transition in postsecondary education. It has

the potential of eliminating the homogenization of an increasingly diverse international student population and their experience with academic transition in post-secondary education.

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