

‘I have been very tired’: First-year international students’ complex university transitions during the pandemic

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Research Domains

International contexts and perspectives (ICP)

Abstract

Many international education activities came to a sudden halt when the pandemic started, which may have had severe consequences on student mobility and academic learning. This qualitative study analyses international students’ first-year university experiences during the pandemic using the transition model. The findings suggest that international students’ physical locations resulted in vastly different first-year experiences. Although all students were unsatisfied with online learning, studying in different time zones was particularly detrimental to students’ mental and physical health. Maintaining a strict routine, engaging with peers in local society, and locating peers through social media platforms were perceived to be the most effective strategies to support their transitions to their first year of international university education in an online mode. This study offers implications for hybrid learning, which continues to be an important feature in all forms of education, as well as for international students’ transitions to international higher education.

Full paper

Literature Review

The existing literature on international students in higher education is extensive and highlights the challenges and obstacles students

face. The most commonly studied themes are cross-cultural adjustment (transition/acculturation/adaptation), mental health problems (stress/depression), second-language acquisition, intercultural development (competency), and student migration (labour market/push-pull factors) (Jing et al. 2020). For long-term or degree-pursuing students, the socio-cultural, academic, and emotional well-being and adjustment literature are the key focuses (Gümüş et al. 2020). Critical factors influencing international student adjustment include early life experiences, resilience, self-efficacy, spiritual and social support, coping style, personality, and emotional and cultural intelligence (Mesidor and Sly 2016).

Recent scholarships have shown that international students encountered different types of obstacles during the pandemic. The international travel restrictions, financial impacts, socio-political events, and communal hate crimes have all put international students into vulnerable positions, especially in the top international student recipient countries (Alaklabi et al. 2021; Anadavalli et al. 2020). Issues concerning safety, health, mental health, and racial biases have adversely affected students of colour, Chinese students, and Asian students in the U.S. and Canada (Blake et al. 2021; Gao 2021; Ge 2021).

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the person-environment framework in college student development (Bronfenbrenner 1993) and applies the theory of transitions (Goodman et al. 2006; Schlossberg 1981). The person-environment framework provides a lens for analysing student development and outcomes in college. It encompasses the interacting forces of ideology and culture, social and organizational structure, time, and individual agency (Arnold et al. 2012).

Methodology

The research project was designed to be a mixed-method project to explore students' transitions from international high schools to higher education during the global pandemic. This paper specifically reports the findings from in-depth interviews to explain the 'essential invariant structure' of students' international transitioning experiences (Creswell and Poth 2017 p. 129).

The research population consists of students who were attending higher education institutions in a country different from their home country or high school country and who had completed their first year in college by the summer of 2021. Research participants were recruited through purposive sampling (Merriam and Tisdell 2015).

Findings and Discussion

It is within the expectation that students entering adulthood face similar issues and challenges that are common to their developmental stages, such as seeking and finding independence, seeking connections and belongingness, and contemplating the best options for future career choices. What stood out was how different situations placed them within particularly difficult environments. The key distinction between student groups on positive and negative experiences is their location. The interviewees who studied abroad at home for their first year were physically in East or Southeast Asia while attending universities in the United States and the United Kingdom. Their experiences stand in stark contrast to students who lived in dorms in the U.S. and the UK and had access to campus facilities, and overall were more satisfied with their transitions.

The purpose of this research is to examine first-year international students' transnational university transition during the COVID-19 pandemic. The macrosystem and time-specific event ensued complex 'multiple transitions', which affected students' establishment of and interaction with various components from microsystem to exosystem. If measuring college student success by GPA, grades, and retention, all study participants should have had a year of academic success. With good pre-college preparation and previous cross-cultural exposures, they did not seem to face linguistic barriers that other international students would nor the financial burden that underprivileged students would. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that time zone distortion, physical disconnection, missed opportunities, and narrowed support networks were detrimental to student growth and well-being at a crucial developmental stage. Such struggles would be aggravated to a greater extent for underprivileged students and traditional international student groups.

This research raises important questions about the overall negative

evaluation of remote learning and first-year integration programs, especially for international students who could not access campus. From students' perspectives, it was not easy to reach out to faculty mentors and student affairs professionals from a distance nor within the hybrid educational context. Hybrid and distance learning will continue to be an important feature in all forms of education and so as the students who transition into international higher education. It would be fruitful to pursue future research on effective institutional practices in education settings involving students at a distance. Future research could explore and compare the in-person versus the virtual transitions for the same groups of students, even using different methodologies to study diverse international student populations.

References

**The reference list below is a shortened version of the submitted paper for this conference. The full reference list is long for the full paper.*

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