

Foreign Students' Adjustment in Early Days of Their University Education: The Stress and Strains

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Abstract

The study purported to understand the experiences of foreign students on their early days of their university education. A lot has been done to ascertain how students generally fare on university campuses but little research attention had been paid to how people from different socio-cultural, political and economic backgrounds fared when they settled to commence their education in a foreign land, and how they managed the challenges. The qualitative study used 26 international students from five countries pursuing undergraduate education at the Catholic University College of Ghana. The study unveils that the international students in the University College experience some social, academic and economic challenges in their early days on campus. The study has brought to the fore the inadequacy of the measures that the authorities put in place to enhance international students' adjustment on campus. The university authority needs to have special and intensive orientation for its fresh international students to ameliorate, if not to eradicate, the hardships such students encounter when they gain admission and commenced their study. The knowledge gained from the study is key to tertiary institutions in formulating effective orientation and strategies for institutions that admit international students.

Keywords: *International or foreign students, social, economic and academic challenges, cultural differences, cultural shock, adjustment and experiences.*

1. Introduction

The role of education in human resource and national development has been realised since time immemorial. Consequently, nations have made strenuous efforts of giving their citizens quality education at all levels of education. Individuals and countries sponsor students either in or outside their home countries to enrol in programmes at universities that would satisfy their developmental needs. Some families and individuals also expend their limited resources on university education in local and foreign institutions. Since the inception of university education over 800 years ago, it has spread to all continents and all countries, and students' enrolments have also increased markedly. There has been a massification of higher education in the recent time. Student enrolment had passed the 100 million mark and that if universities were a country, that country would rank twelfth among the world's largest country, just after Mexico (UNESCO, 2008). It is not only the numbers of university students that have increased astronomically, but also the range of courses that universities offer has increased manifold. Universities have been providing litany of courses to meet the diverse needs of individuals and nations.

Higher education can no longer be discussed in strictly national context but borders on internationalization, which is an embodiment of the whole operation of higher education (Okoli, 2013). The internationalization of higher education has been a major growth industry world wide (Bodycott, 2009). People from all walks of life move to different countries to receive higher education with the view to acquiring knowledge and skills that would enable them achieve success in personal, academic and professional endeavours. Across the world, more students choose to study abroad, enrolling in foreign education programmes (Okoli, 2013). In 2009, more than 367 million students attended tertiary education outside their native countries (OECD, 2011). International students have become a respectable population group in academic institutions in most countries, the world over. Educational institutions that admit international students also derive immense benefits from it. It is asserted that international students enhance the academic environment by providing

resources for the internationalization of the curriculum and promote global understanding through their diverse educational backgrounds and cultures (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004, Popadiuk & Arthur, 2004). In this modern era, curricula of educational institutions that help serve as *pot purri*, *mixing bowl* or *melting point* are cherished by well-meaning educationists, especially educational sociologists, who are highly interested in promoting unity in diversity in multi-cultural societies.

Myriad of issues motivate people to opt to study in countries other than theirs. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) found that demand for international education is driven by expectation to raise the graduates' economic and social status especially within the higher education. They also found that the historical and colonial link between host and home countries play a role in determining where students travel for study. Their study revealed that for many countries in Asia and Africa in particular, lack of access to higher education is a key driver for international student flow.

It has also been realised that economic and cultural forces play an important role in shaping international students' migration market (Dreher & Potvaara, 2005). A study conducted in Ghana to ascertain factors influencing graduates' decision on where to have further studies disclosed that the availability of quality academic facilities and supervision, employment prospects after graduation, desire to have international touch and society's regards for foreign education pull graduates to pursue advance studies in universities outside the country (Kuranchie, Sarkodie & Acquah, 2014).

Commencing academic journey in a foreign land is usually daunting. This is because there are marked differences in cultural, social and economic orientations of different countries. International students come with diverse cultural and educational orientations from their home countries, which can hinder their adjustment and commencement of their academic pursuits. The early days of their stay are daunting and bewildering. Foreign students face a number of challenges, which negatively influence their academic work. The challenges may act alone or in conjunction with others to affect foreign students' adjustment and studies. Student adjustment to college is one key variable linked to student attrition. A student ability to successfully move into and 'fit' into the culture of an institution dictates whether that student will terminate his/her education prior to completion of a degree (Tinto, 1987). Cameron and Kirkman's (2010) meta-analysis also disclosed that entrance into universities was a crucial time for those from international locations. They, therefore, suggest that universities ought to provide support and guidance for first year international students to enable them acquire the necessary academic, social and cultural competence to come to terms with the challenges of cultural shock.

To avert or minimise the challenges that students face, universities do offer orientations for both domestic and international students to facilitate their adjustment on campus. An orientation, which usually lasts a number of days, is given to students to make them familiar with the academic and social demands of university education. While some institutions have separate and distinct orientation programmes for foreign and domestic students, others have same orientation for all students. It is unsound, therefore, to assume that all students (foreign and domestic) have the same orientation needs, hence fashioning the same programme for them. Clearly, international students are heterogeneous and multi-cultural, with the students imbued with different experiences. Appropriate strategies are required to help them adjust and adapt themselves to the new learning environment.

In addition, existing international students who have knowledge about the newness they encountered do assist the fresh students to adjust smoothly on campus. Foreign students and their groups at advance levels of their education do offer social support to fresh students. Colvin and Jaffer (2007) assert that international student groups offer key support to first year international students although they recognise the importance and value of the relationship they forge with domestic students as well. Social support was found to be a strong predictor for freshmen students' academic success. In the study, social support acted as an insulator from harmful effects of stress, which resulted in perceived control and ability to cope with the stress from the first year experience (DeBarard, et al, 2004). Regrettably, it has been found that many foreign students, most often, do not seek assistance from foreign students in advance levels to deal with the challenges they encounter (Wilson & Lizzio, 2008).

1.1 Problem statement

Although there is plethora of studies conducted to unravel the challenges that fresh international students encounter on universities' campuses, there seemed to be lack of attention on the peculiar socio-cultural and academic challenges that they encounter and how they navigate through them. Given the importance of this issue to the successful stay of such fresh students on campus, the study purported to understand the experiences of foreign students on their early days on campus. Do foreign students seek assistance for the challenges they encounter? How do they handle the challenges they encounter? Are they satisfied with the responses they get? The questions needed empirical-based answers, hence the study.

1.2 Purpose of study

The purpose of the study was three fold namely to:

- (i) unravel the factors that motivated international students to opt to study in the university;
- (ii) unearth the challenges that the international students encountered in the early days of the academic journey on campus; and
- (iii) ascertain how they dealt with the challenges they encountered.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1 Study Design

The study sought to explore the experiences of foreign students and how easily or otherwise they adjusted into the system to commence their study. For the aim of the study to be achieved, the study was designed within the rubric of post-positivist qualitative, narrative analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative research studies people's experience through the tales they tell, whether in the form of biography, life history, interviews or other materials that are gathered as people compose their lives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

2.2 Study Population

The Catholic University College of Ghana since its inception has had a mix of Ghanaian and foreign students. A representative sample of students from the various countries pursuing undergraduate programmes was used. Convenience and purposive sampling techniques were employed to sample 26 foreign students to participate in the study.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data gathering were executed via semi-structured interview with the students. The instrument was peer reviewed as required of qualitative instrument to ensure high validity. The students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in the reporting of findings. The interview was recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Before the analysis, their responses were played back to them for authentication. Narrative and content analysis were done and the results are presented thematically under social, academic and economic challenges.

3. Results of the Study

3.1 Bio-data of Participants

Some vital bio-data about the respondents were elicited and are presented in the table below.

Gender	Frequency	Percent (%)
Male	13	50
Female	13	50
Total	26	100
Age Group		
Less than 20 years	3	11.5
21 – 25	10	38.5
26 – 30	7	26.9
More than 30 years	6	23.1
Total	26	100
Nationality		
Nigerian	11	42.3
La Cote d'Ivoire	11	42.3
Kenyan	1	3.8
Burkinabe	3	11.6
Total	26	100
Where participants received pre-tertiary education		
Home Country	26	100
Ghana	–	–
Total	26	100

The results demonstrate that both male and female foreign students in the Catholic University College of Ghana are fairly represented in the study. Hence, the views expressed by the students are not skewed toward any gender group.

The data provided also indicate that the participants are relatively young, receiving tertiary education in a foreign land. The relative youthfulness of the foreign students necessitates ascertainment of the stress and strains they encountered in the early days of their stay on campus. The desire to exude youthful exuberance by young students when they gain admission into university is very eminent. As whether foreign students who find themselves not only in a different level of education, which has its own workings and practices, but also an environment that has vast different socio-cultural expectations adjust on campus easily or not is an issue that ought to be dear to the heart of university administrators. Academic institutions need not only strive to attract international students, but also to ensure their smooth adjustment.

The data on the nationality of the participants revealed that the Nigerians and Ivoirians dominated in the study. The nationals of these two countries dominate the general foreign student population at the University College as per the record at the Dean of Students Affairs Office. Hence, there is a fair representation of countries in the study. The study results demonstrate that the institution is experiencing regionalization of international student mobility. This is because the foreign students studying in the institution are mainly from countries within the West African sub-region in the African continent.

The results further show that all the students had their pre-tertiary education in their home countries. Implicitly, the participants' first experience of the students in Ghana was when they got admission and arrived to commence their university education. Organisation of intensive orientation for such individuals ought to be a *sine qua non*, for anything short of that could put them in a state of limbo, confusion and uneasiness.

3.2 Reasons for choosing to study in Ghana

The study sought to ascertain the rationale for the international students' choice to have tertiary education in Ghana after receiving pre-tertiary education in their home countries. Varied reasons were given for their migration for university education in the country. The students from la Cote d' Ivoire, for instance, revealed that seeking education in Ghana was a safe haven for them. The civil unrest in their country contributed greatly in deciding to choose Ghana as a study destination. Besides, some other students from the Francophone countries opted to study in Ghana with the aim to improve their English speaking and writing. The students reiterated that their desire to be fluent in the spoken and written English Language accounted for studying in Ghana. They claimed that being able to speak two international languages was a plus and an advantage for them.

Some other reasons offered for their academic *sojourn* in Ghana are to have a change of environment. Studying in a different country would enable them experience diverse cultures and new ways of doing things. Some of them also said that the availability of preferred courses of study made them choose to study in Ghana. As a student said, *I've been interested in getting a health and human development degree programme since childhood. Public Health Education offered in the University College has provided the opportunity for me to realise that dream.*

The study further sought to unveil the rationale for choosing to study in the Catholic University College of Ghana amidst the array of public and private universities in the country. Ghana now has eight (8) public and over forty (40) private universities. The participants were unequivocal on the following reasons for choosing to study in the University College: the preferred courses or programmes of study offered by the university; parental influence; and religious and disciplinary reasons. Some of the participants averred that the University College would enable them enjoy both spiritual and intellectual growth and development; hence receiving the kind of training they desired. The participants believed that the institution gives the kind of training and teaching that would make them productive in life. The participants indicated that Catholic institutions are known for their sound, holistic and quality education as they hire high quality staff, who are serious at achieving high academic standards. The high quality education provided by Catholic institutions served as a bait to attract international students into the University College.

On the issue of whether the reasons for opting to study in the University College were being materialised, 20 of the participants indicated yes, five (5) said no and 1 person indicated partially. The results clearly show that the University College is meeting the expectations of the foreign students. It is only a few of the students who held the view that the institution was not helping to realise their motives for opting to study in the University College.

It was also verified from the participants whether they had smooth adjustment when they commenced their academic journey on campus. The responses show that while 12 of the participants claimed to have had smooth adjustment, 14 of them did not have that pleasant experience. The responses demonstrate that majority of the

respondents did not have smooth adjustment in their early days on campus. This may be attributable to the lack of special orientation for foreign students to improve their social and academic competence.. Most of the participants shared the view that no special intensive orientation was given to them to make them acclimatised with the social and economic situations in the country. In view of the growing international competition for students, it is prudent for institutions to help foreign students adjust smoothly when they commence their academic journey. When such students experience and enjoy effective transition and eventually good academic experience, they would be the apostles of the university in other parts of the world.

4. Challenges encountered by the students

The findings on the challenges that the international students encountered are organised thematically into social, economic and academic.

4.1 Social challenges

The respondents indicated language and cultural differences as challenges they experienced especially outside lecture halls. The international students claimed that some of the domestic students used local languages in some social discourses at the hostels, which made it difficult for the international students to interact with them. This situation affected their interactions with their colleagues. Also, the lifestyle and some practices of the domestic students were alien to them, which made it difficult to develop and forge close relation, ties and friendship with them, said some participants. It is really difficult to mingle with people with different values and attitudes

Another pertinent social challenge they encountered was the negative attitude some students have about foreign students from some particular countries. As a student lamented, *the domestic students have a belief that nationals of some countries are bad but they are good. With this belief, they do shun away from you and do not want to have even group discussion with you*, he added.

4.2 Economic Challenges

Due to differences in the economic system of countries, it was very prudent to elicit from international students the challenges they encountered when they had their first experience in the Ghanaian economy. The following challenges were given by the participants:

The students had difficulty with opening bank accounts and getting acquainted with the Ghanaian currency. The participants lamented that the Ghana cedi had numerous denominations, which made it difficult to be familiar with them. Not all, the incessant fluctuation in the Ghanaian currency and unstable prices of commodities rendered the value of the money remitted to them valueless. As two participants indicated, *you have to increase the demand of money from your parents every month and your parents tend to wonder and doubt the inconsistency in the demand*.

4.3 Academic challenges

The rationale for embarking on academic *sojourn* in Ghana and the Catholic University College was to have sound education so it was deemed appropriate to ascertain the challenges they encountered when they started their programmes of choice, if any. The participants indicated that some lecturers' approach to teaching, which was purely lecture, was alien and uncomfortable to them. The teaching approaches they experienced were at variance with what they had had during their pre-tertiary education time. It might take time for the students to adjust to the teaching styles of the lecturers handling them at the institution.

Other academic challenges that the international students had are difficulty in getting used to academic rules and regulations in the Ghanaian university and adjusting into the new academic environment. The negative attitude of some lecturers and some students towards foreign students influenced their dealings with the foreign students. A participant indicated that once, when teaching an issue on people who deceive unsuspected buyers, a lecturer would say *like these our friends from that country*, which is derogatory, defamatory and humiliating.

The participants indicated that securing and renewing of residence permit were cumbersome for them. The delay in processing the permit puts the students in a limbo and affects their academic work. They had to move to and from the Immigration Office a number of times to get their permit. The time spent to secure residence permit could have been used

for academic purpose.

4.4 Handling of challenges encountered

The study further probed into how they dealt with the challenges that they faced when they started their education in the institution. The researchers were interested in ascertaining what the foreign students used to buffer the demands of the institution and other stress and strains encountered to enable them smoothly adjust into the system.

Some students posited that *each society has its own behaviour, culture and attitude so as foreign student we had no option than to accept and adjust to the conduct of the domestic students*. Some participants indicated that they tried their best to overlook those things and adjust to the new learning environment they found themselves.

Most of the students indicated that they reported the issues to the Dean of students, Registrar, lecturers and colleague students for assistance. The responses show that the students sought assistance in one form or the other to be able to deal with the challenges they encountered.

The participants were given an opportunity to make suggestions that could help make international students adjust smoothly when they arrived on campus. The following were given: reduction of foreign students' fees; separate blocks at the campus-based hostels need to be given to foreign students; intensive orientation for foreign students to make them familiar with the Ghanaian educational system and economy, and to help them socialise the more.

Some participants also suggested that the University's authorities need to pay more attention to foreign students and provide good facilities for them; facilitate the securing and renewal of residence permits to enable them have smooth adjustment.

Lecturers and domestic students need to be given education to erase the negative stereotype they have about nationals of some countries. Lecturers, in particular, need to be conscious of the foreign students' concerns and respect them.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The study unveiled that the motivating factors for the international students opting to study in the University College range from religious to social. The notion that Catholic institutions hire high quality professionals to raise institutional quality, improve student learning opportunities and enrich students' intellectual competence was influential in attracting foreign students into the University College. Nonetheless, the foreign students had an exhilarating experience, which had the tendency to make them experience anxiety and psychological discomfort.

The orientation organised for the international students did not seem to be effective enough to aid their smooth adjustment on campus. The participants are not satisfied with the kind of orientation extended to the foreign students to enable adjust in the institution. Providing distinct, robust and tailor-made orientation programmes is a sure way to ensuring smooth adjustment of fresh international students on campus to kick start their academic journey.

The international student group on campus does not seem to help in this direction as they were not mentioned as a resort when the foreign students were in difficulty. Consequently, the University College needs to sensitize and include the international student groups in the orientation programme for the members to contribute to making the transition of the international students a smooth one. They potential in international student groups need to be exploited to the advantage of fresh international students and the institution.

Universities need to provide relevant support to help international students cope with challenges they encounter when they start their education in the institutions. Further, a unit needs to be created in the Office of Students Affairs to provide an environment for the welfare of International students concerning academic, residential and social matters. The unit would contribute to making the students appreciate and accommodate the diverse cultures within the University College. The unit, if established, could also provide opportunity for emotional, psychological, academic and career counselling for international students.

In sum, the university college and other institutions that have similar experience concerning their foreign students' adjustment need to enhance such students' success by providing more effective support to such students to have a smooth transition into a new learning environment. First year international students need assistance to enhance their academic and social experience.

Do foreign students drop out of school due to the challenges they encounter when they start their advance academic journey in tertiary institutions? An extensive investigation to find an answer to this question would be good.

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