

Understanding of International Doctoral Students' Challenges: A Literature Review Study

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ABSTRACT

Studies pertaining to the challenges international doctoral students confront have been disseminated at various conferences and in journals. However, there is a need to synthesize recent research to assess and advance contemporary theories about international doctoral students. Using meta-synthesis, this article discusses the literature's main themes and the relationship between theory and the literature findings. A new tentative framework is proposed based on the results. Implications for international doctoral students' academic success are also discussed.

Keywords: academic success, international doctoral students, internationalization, students' experience

In the United States, higher education institutions enrolled 749,329 international graduate students, 34% of whom were doctoral students in the 2018 fall admission cycle (Okahana & Zhou, 2019). In the United Kingdom, 46% of students studying at the postgraduate level were international students in 2017–2018 (UK Council for International Student Affairs, 2019). However, not every international doctoral student completed their studies. The difficulties and challenges that could impact their degree completion have been receiving attention from scholars. Therefore, an updated synthesis of the research is needed to gain a basic overview of the recent research status. The present study sheds light on international doctoral students. Doctoral education is highly internationalized by nature. In this study, the focus is on students who do not speak English as their first language and who pursue a doctoral degree in an English-speaking country. This review

aims to assess the scholarly literature on the challenges confronted by international doctoral students and propose a framework to view their experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Tinto's integration model (1987, 1993) was chosen as a key theory to examine and assess the research examined in this study. Tinto's model focuses on students' experiences in higher education institutions holistically. It links students' experiences to degree completion, which is both the goal for institutions and students. Also, since the academic outcome of doctoral students is not measured by grade point average, degree completion is essential to indicate the academic success of this group of students. Therefore, the present study uses this framework to examine the literature and proposes a way to conceptualize international doctoral students' experiences based on this framework.

According to Tinto (1987), before entering higher education, individuals have different family and community backgrounds. They also have a variety of personal attributes, skills, value orientations, and varying types of pre-college educational experiences and achievements. Other than the personal characteristics of individuals, the subsequent experiences within the institution are centrally related to degree completion. Positive experiences intensify the goal of college completion and heighten the commitment between the individual and the institution; negative experiences weaken the intentions and commitments and lead to a higher chance of leaving without a degree. External forces (e.g., families, neighborhoods, peer groups, work settings, etc.) also influence the change of individuals' goals and commitments.

Due to the distinct nature of doctoral study versus undergraduate study, Tinto (1993) updated his model, in which he stated that doctoral students were more likely aligned with the norms of the specific field of study than with the broader university. Therefore, doctoral students' academic success, especially in the later stage of studies, would be more likely tied to a particular faculty member or a group of faculty members, such as one's supervisor or committee members.

METHOD

This study used qualitative metasynthesis as the method to investigate. Qualitative metasynthesis offers "a coherent description or explanation of a target event or experience, instead of a summary view of unlinked features of that event or experience" (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007, p. 152). By synthesizing the findings between studies, it generated a more comprehensive integration to answer the research questions.

Data were extracted from two databases, *ERIC* and *Web of Science*, which are frequently used in literature reviews of a similar nature. Since negative experiences could lead to students' early departure, search terms included: "international doctora* students" or "international PhD students" combined with

“experience,” “difficult*,” “challenge,” “obstacle,” “dilemma,” “hardship,” “pain,” and “stress*,” respectively.

After the initial search, only empirical qualitative studies within the scope of focus were selected. Studies, such as analyzing the writing texts from a linguistic perspective, were excluded. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria and deleting duplications, 28 studies were left for analysis (see Table 1 for included studies).

Table 1: Studies Included

Campbell, T. A. (2015). A phenomenological study on international doctoral students' acculturation experiences at a U.S. university. *Journal of International Students*, 5(3), 285–299.

Chang, Y., & Kanno, Y. (2010). NNES doctoral students in English-speaking academe: The nexus between language and discipline. *Applied Linguistics (Oxford)*, 31(5), 671–692.

Chatterjee-Padmanabhan, M., & Nielsen, W. (2018). Preparing to cross the research proposal threshold: A case study of two international doctoral students. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 55(4), 417–424.

Cho, S. (2009). Disciplinary enculturation experiences of five East Asian doctoral students in US-based second language studies programmes. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 29(3), 295–310.

Doyle, S., Manathunga, C., Prinsen, G., Tallon, R., & Cornforth, S. (2018). African international doctoral students in New Zealand: Englishes, doctoral writing and intercultural supervision. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 37(1), 1–14.

Fotovatian, S. (2012). Three constructs of institutional identity among international doctoral students in Australia. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(5), 577–588.

Gao, Y. (2019). Experiences of Chinese international doctoral students in Canada who withdrew: A narrative inquiry. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 14, 259–276.

Goode, J. (2007). Empowering or disempowering the international Ph.D. student? Constructions of the dependent and independent learner. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(5), 589–603.

Holliday, A. (2017). PhD students, interculturality, reflexivity, community and internationalisation. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 38(3), 206–218.

Jang, Y. J., Woo, H., & Henfield, M. S. (2014). A qualitative study of challenges faced by international doctoral students in counselor education supervision courses. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 15(4), 561–572.

Khozaei, F., Naidu, S., Khozaei, Z., & Salleh, N. A. (2015). An exploratory study of factors that affect the research progress of international PhD students from the Middle East. *Education + Training, 57*(4), 448–460.

Ku, H. Y., Lahman, M. K. E., Yeh, H. T., & Cheng, Y. C. (2008). Into the academy: preparing and mentoring international doctoral students. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 56*(3), 365–377.

Le, T., & Gardner, S. K. (2010). Understanding the doctoral experience of Asian international students in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields: An exploration of one institutional context. *Journal of College Student Development, 51*(3), 252–264.

Lee, M. C. Y., McMahon, M., & Watson, M. (2018). Supporting the career decisions of Australian-based international Chinese doctoral students. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance, 18*(3), 257–277.

Lee, S. (2017). Peer support for international doctoral students in managing supervision relationships. *Journal of International Students, 7*(4), 1096–1103.

Li, M. (2016). Developing skills and disposition for lifelong learning: Acculturative issues surrounding supervising international doctoral students in New Zealand universities. *Journal of International Students, 6*(3), 740–761.

Mittal, M., & Wieling, E. (2006). Training experiences of international doctoral students in marriage and family therapy. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 32*(3), 369–383.

Ours, J. C., & Ridder, G. (2003). Fast track or failure: A study of the graduation and dropout rates of Ph.D. students in economics. *Economics of Education Review, 22*(2), 157–166.

Russell-Pinson, L., & Harris, M. L. (2019). Anguish and anxiety, stress and strain: Attending to writers' stress in the dissertation process. *Journal of Second Language Writing, 43*, 63–71.

Sato, T. (2016). Doctoral sojourn experiences of adapted physical education students from Asian countries. *Journal of International Students, 6*(2), 339–366.

Son, J., & Park, S. (2015). Academic experiences of international PhD students in Australian higher education: From an EAP program to a PhD program. *International Journal of Pedagogies and Learning, 9*(1), 26–37.

Wang, T., & Li, L. Y. (2011). 'Tell me what to do' vs. 'guide me through it': Feedback experiences of international doctoral students. *Active Learning in Higher Education, 12*(2), 101–112.

Williams-Shakespeare, E. S., Bronteng, J. E., & Alahmari, A. (2018). Interpersonal hardiness as a critical contributing factor to persistence among

international women in doctoral programs: A trioethnographic study. *The Qualitative Report*, 23(8), 1797–1822.

Winchester-Seeto, T., Homewood, J., Thogersen, J., Jacenyik-Trawoger, C., Manathunga, C., Reid, A., & Holbrook, A. (2014). Doctoral supervision in a cross-cultural context: Issues affecting supervisors and candidates. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 33(3), 610–626.

Xu, L., & Grant, B. (2017). International doctoral students' becoming: A dialogic perspective. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 54(6), 570–579.

Ye, L., & Edwards, V. (2015). Chinese overseas doctoral student narratives of intercultural adaptation. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 14(3), 228–241. doi:10.1177/1475240915614934

Ye, L., & Edwards, V. (2017). A narrative inquiry into the identity formation of Chinese doctoral students in relation to study abroad. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, 20(6), 865–876.

Zhang, Y. (2016). International students in transition: Voices of Chinese doctoral students in a U.S. research university. *Journal of International Students*, 6(1), 175–194.

RESULTS

After extracting, editing, grouping and abstracting findings (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007), I identified seven themes.

The relationship with one's supervisor(s) and language barriers were the two most frequently mentioned challenges. Supervisors played a significant part in international doctoral students' academic lives (Goode, 2007; Lee et al., 2018; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019; Sato, 2016; Xu & Grant, 2017; Zhang, 2016). Some students experienced positive, equal, and collegial relationships with their supervisors; meanwhile, challenges could come from unequal power dynamics, tensions, and mismatches in research and expectations (Le & Gardner, 2010; Wang & Li, 2011). Language barriers, however, could bring misunderstanding and confusion, which worsened the problems for international doctoral students. Some studies have shown that students who were supervised by active researchers tend to have a lower attrition rate (Khozaei et al., 2015; Ours & Ridder, 2003). On the contrary, in other studies, inaccessibility of supervisors who were active researchers hindered the research progress of students (Gao, 2019; Ku et al., 2008).

Language barriers affected communication with supervisors and peers, undertaking academic tasks, social networking, and overall experiences in the host country for international doctoral students (Campbell, 2015; Li, 2016; Holliday, 2017; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014; Son & Park, 2015; Ye & Edwards, 2017; Zhang, 2016). The fact that they were held to the same stringent standard as their domestic counterparts placed them at a severe disadvantage. However, English proficiency might not have the same value across different disciplines and

might not always be critical to international doctoral students' academic success (Chang & Kanno, 2010). For instance, studies reported that humanities and social science fields placed stricter requirements of English proficiency than the STEM fields. (Chang & Kanno, 2010; Le & Gardner, 2010).

Studying abroad required international doctoral students to socialize, build networks, and make new friends in the new environment and the new culture. The cultural differences between the home country and the host country have been seen as the roots of adaptation (Doyle et al., 2018; Jang et al., 2014; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Ye & Edwards, 2017). Baba and Hosoda (2014) specified that social disconnectedness, homesickness, discrimination, and culture shock negatively affected international students' sociocultural adaptation. Different home cultures also impacted them distinctively (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan & Nielsen, 2018; Cho, 2009; Holliday, 2017; Zhang, 2016). These differences also manifested in teaching and learning styles for some students (Jang et al., 2014; Son & Park, 2015; Wang & Li, 2011). Some students felt the learning material lacked cross-cultural content (Jang et al., 2014); some had a hard time adapting to discussion-based teaching styles (Goode, 2007; Wang & Li, 2011).

Separation from familiarities and the support system was another recorded challenge, which led to a need to reestablish new support systems. Peer support and faculty support from the academic setting and family/friend support from the social setting could have exercised an impact on the academic success of international doctoral students (Campbell, 2015; Le & Gardner, 2010; Lee, 2017; Son & Park, 2015; Williams-Shakespeare et al., 2018; Winchester-Seeto et al., 2014; Zhang, 2016). At a mature age, spousal/conjugal support was another source of support that could influence international doctoral students' experiences.

The transnational experiences caused identity issues as well; however, it functioned as a double-edged sword in international doctoral students' lives (Fotovatian, 2012; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Ye & Edwards, 2015; Ye & Edwards, 2017; Zhang, 2016). When taken-for-granted or past habits can no longer reliably guide individual actions, some international doctoral students were reported to struggle with a new identity as an "outsider" and "invisible person" in the host country and apparent differences in self. Along with the adjustment and identity challenges, some students also expressed their emotions resulted from the transnational learning experiences, for instance, loneliness, anxiety, isolation, and frustration (Li, 2016; Mittal & Wieling, 2006; Russell-Pinson & Harris, 2019; Sato, 2016; Wang & Li, 2011). Yet, the study abroad experience facilitated the accumulation of international doctoral students' personal capital, providing opportunities for self-development. They became more attentive to cultural diversities, more tolerant with differences, and more responsible as adults and autonomous learners (Zhang, 2016).

Research challenges were another obstacle that came, on the one hand, from the very nature of conducting research, and, on the other hand, from the unfamiliarity of discipline-specific discourse such as adapting the writing style for academic purposes (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan & Nielsen, 2018; Sato, 2016; Son & Park, 2015). The implicit conventions of scholarly writing in a new

educational context and understanding the tacit expectations can be especially overwhelming for international doctoral students who use English as a second language (Chatterjee-Padmanabhan & Nielsen, 2018). Lacking local connections could make it difficult for some students to access data sources, conduct interviews, and collect documents for their studies (Sato, 2016).

Last but not least is financial constraint. Financial burden impacts graduate students in general. Many students took on teaching assistant or research assistant roles while conducting their doctoral research to relieve financial pressure (Le & Gardner, 2010; Williams-Shakespeare et al., 2018). The working constraints of the student permit and the ineligibility to apply for local student loans and government grants placed international doctoral students in a more disadvantaged position. Students who brought family and children to the host country faced an even more harsh situation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY

Some identified themes correspond with Tinto's (1987, 1993) model, which emphasized that in the later stage of studies for doctoral students, persistence would link closely to a particular faculty member or a group of faculty members. In the findings, relationship with supervisors was the most frequently mentioned theme in the literature, which echoed Tinto's model. Support from peers and faculty members in the academic setting, and family and spouse from the social setting, also demonstrated influences on the academic success of international doctoral students.

Tinto's (1993) model explains some findings; however, some themes are left out of the model: language barriers, cultural assimilation, research challenges, identity issues, and financial constraints. In Tinto's (1987) model on domestic students, the transition from students' past forms of life, such as the family and neighborhood where they grew up, to the institutional environment was a challenge students needed to overcome. This transitional process for international doctoral students consists of the adjustment from one country to another country and from one culture to another culture. In other words, the transitional challenge is amplified, and the adjustment is not restricted to the institutional environment but a broader societal level in the host country.

Therefore, based on the findings and the structure of Tinto's model, I propose we view the challenges international doctoral students confront from five domains: academic, social, cultural, psychological, and economic, which form the experience of international doctoral students collectively. The academic domain includes the relationship with the supervisor(s), peer and faculty support, and research challenges; the social domain includes family/spousal support and social networking; the cultural domain includes language barriers and cultural adaptation; the psychological domain includes identity issue and emotions; and the economic domain includes financial constraints. But again, these domains work collaboratively and mutually affect each other in shaping the experiences of international doctoral students (see Figure 1).

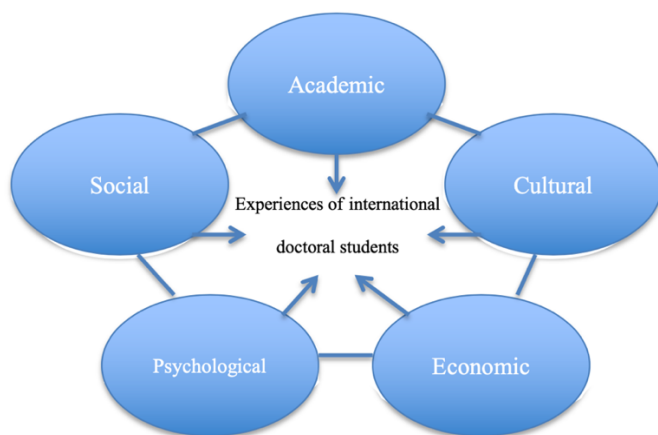


Figure 1: Five Domains of International Doctoral Students' Experience

In a nutshell, this synthesis provides educators and practitioners with a timely summary of the research status and a framework to better engage with international doctoral students. Institutions could consider providing orientation sessions and English preparation courses. International admission offices may facilitate the adaptation of students through organizing social family events and other activities. Professional development workshops could be held to raise professors' and supervisors' cultural awareness. A dialogic space needs to be created for respectful interactions and reciprocity. Faculties and departments could provide students with the opportunities that contribute to building the sense of community and belonging; encourage the integration of diverse teaching materials; and facilitate the formation of mentoring relationships where students can relate with supervisors on an individual basis. Overall, there is a need for all stakeholders to be culturally responsive for a successful international education.

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