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International graduate students' experiences and intentions to stay in the United States ¹

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the experiences of international graduate students at a private university in the south-central United States and explores their intentions to remain in the United States after graduation. Through semistructured interviews with eleven students, the research investigates how participants adapted to a new academic and cultural environment and how these experiences informed their future plans. The interview data were coded through a two-step process that involved first analyzing students' initial arrival experiences and then identifying key factors shaping decisions about remaining in the United States. The findings highlight the interconnected roles of early challenges, institutional and national contexts, social support, and students' personal circumstances and cultural backgrounds. Most participants planned to stay or considered staying depending on future conditions. A clear relationship emerged between initial adjustment difficulties, levels of social support, and postgraduate plans.*

Keywords: International graduate students, cultural adaptation, postgraduate plans, retention

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The United States has been a leader in international education worldwide for many years. While some students return to their home countries after completing their education, others remain in the United States and contribute to the country's economy. At the national level, international students represent an important source of talent for the country's workforce (NAFSA, 2006). Therefore, ensuring the retention of international students is important. The United States' current and future economic strength is linked to a highly qualified workforce consisting of international students who remain after graduation. In this context, the experiences of students during their development process, the fundamental problems they encounter, and efforts to support their adaptation are important (Douglass & Edelstein, 2009; Banjong & Olson, 2016). Education services are important for many countries, including the United States. However, international education does not always grow at a steady pace. In the United States, the perceived or actual difficulty of obtaining a student visa under tightened U.S. immigration policies, as well as the occasional difficulties in obtaining visas depending on the country, have contributed to this fluctuation (Baer & Ekin, 2025; Trice & Yoo, 2007).

The 2020 global pandemic significantly affected international education and reduced student mobility rates. This decline has caused concern among many college and university administrations in the United States. The study also answered questions about how international students' postpandemic experiences have been shaped and whether this process has affected their plans to stay. A large proportion of international students come from developing countries. International students often determine their host country on the basis of factors related to their own and the host country. Age, marital status, financial support, living expenses, security, and demographic factors also influence their choices (Banjong & Olson, 2016). Studies show that professional factors, rather than social and personal factors, are the main determinants for graduate students to study in the United States. Higher-quality education and future career opportunities have been the two most important factors influencing students' decisions to study in the U.S. This has also influenced students' decisions to stay in America. Students who believe there are better career opportunities in the U.S. and who adapt better have stronger intentions to stay. Research shows that the adaptation process affects students' plans to stay after their education (Han et al., 2015:8). This study examines the relationship between adaptation and plans to stay for the international graduate students interviewed.

While this study was being conducted, two important dimensions of the research stood out. The first relates to arrival experiences. The second is how arrival experience affects students' decision to stay. The experiences of international students upon their arrival in the United States have two aspects. The first is the impact of factors related to the host country and university, and the second is the impact of factors stemming from the students' personal circumstances and cultural backgrounds on their decision to stay.

The study was conducted using qualitative methods, with interviews based on semistructured interview questions. Qualitative research processes focus on learning the meanings intended by the participants. Thus, considering the difficulties graduate

students experienced when they first arrived in the United States, this study investigated how their experiences shaped their choices when they were planning their current situation and careers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Challenges Faced by International Students

With the increasing number of international students in colleges and universities in America, the importance of studies aimed at understanding the psychological and adaptation processes in the country is also increasing. At the forefront of these study topics are the difficulties experienced by international students in the target country. Although these areas of difficulty change over time and under the influence of many factors, they remain strongly felt. The areas of difficulty experienced by international students are closely related to each other and can be classified as follows:

Language Proficiency and Problems Related to Academic Processes.

Language proficiency plays a key role in the adaptation process. At this point, the responsibility of faculty members to help students develop skills that will enable them to communicate more effectively is undeniable, as they are in a position to guide the learning of international students. This guidance is also functional in intercultural communication (Özturgut & Murphy, 2010).

For international students, language proficiency can be seen as a significant problem at every stage, from daily needs in the first few months to long-term fundamental steps. Studies on the problems faced by international students in America (Altbach, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007; Triandis, 1991; Mbous et al., 2022;) have shown that residency difficulties, lifestyle changes, and cultural challenges are among the primary difficulties encountered. Language proficiency is seen as a significant determinant of these challenges. Furthermore, language proficiency, along with differences in academic systems, is a major factor in difficulties in academic processes.

Cultural Differences, Cultural Shock

Studies have shown that adaptation is smoother for students from the same cultural region. Moreover, the cultural origin of students affects the degree of adaptation difficulties they experience, the types of difficulties they experience, and even their coping strategies. For example, students of Asian origin use institutional support channels and informal networks more in the process of coping with difficulties (Altbach, 2004; Lee & Rice, 2007; Triandis, 1991; Mbous et al., 2022). While students from different cultures experience difficulties in expressing themselves, seeing and experiencing many different cultures they encounter in America is also shown as a positive situation in terms of students learning about cultural diversity. According to the study by Mulyadi et al. in 2024, cultural shock is a significant barrier for international students. Cultural shock actually includes many factors that are considered problem areas experienced by international students today. In general, cultural shock encompasses challenges such as homesickness, social exclusion, identity confusion, and cultural maladjustment experienced by international students when they enter new academic and social environments. It has several dimensions: emotional impact (homesickness, difficulty in a

new environment), daily experiences (language barriers, nonverbal communication, food), and, finally, academic aspects related to learning. As these dimensions increase, adaptation to the new environment decreases, and the perception of social exclusion increases (Mulyadi et al., 2024).

Psychological difficulties and social networks

Cultural distance, sociocultural adaptation, stress levels, and coping skills emerge as factors that shape the adaptation process of international students (Pinarbasi, 2023). As a result, international students use different strategies to cope with the adaptation problems they experience. For example, solidarity networks are important. Studies show that social support has a largely positive effect on the adaptation process of international students, especially in situations where individual circumstances are difficult (such as being a graduate student and a parent at the same time). Social support can come from family, spouses, or peer groups. It has been reported that peer support facilitates adaptation to universities and that students who receive peer support have better grade point averages. In the absence of social support, an inadequate integration process may be observed (Dongfang & Jingyao, 2025; Moon et al., 2025; Sirgebayeva, 2025).

Being an international student has many advantages. It boosts self-confidence, improves language skills, broadens one's worldview, and provides the ability to establish intercultural relationships. Moreover, these students become more familiar with job opportunities in both their home country and host country (Banjong & Olson; 2016). However, this process can be challenging. It involves adapting to a new environment, getting used to different procedures, and relearning even the simplest daily practices. Common problems these students face include loneliness and homesickness, financial stress, culture shock, discrimination, language difficulties, and anxiety and depression. For some students, this process can be prolonged, affecting their academic success. This situation is also seen in students who move to another city to attend university in their own country. These problems can be even more challenging when one moves to another country (Banjong & Olson; 2016; Gaulee, 2018, Lim, Tam & Lee, 2013).

Factors affecting the decision to stay

One-third of graduate students in science and engineering in the United States are foreign-born (National Science Board, 2014; Han et al., 2015). This significant proportion is considered a contribution in terms of social and human capital. Where students continue their lives after graduation and where they use their knowledge is important. Considering the economic benefits of international students, source countries resort to various means to support students' returns. Providing funding to students on the condition of their return is a particularly common practice (Han et al., 2015:3). Many factors influence this choice.

The behavior of remaining in the country where they studied may also vary depending on the strength of the ties that students maintain with their families. International students with strong ties to their families in their home countries are more likely to return home. Students' difficulties in integrating into the social or academic

culture of the host country and their exposure to various forms of discrimination also influence their posteducation return behavior (Alberts & Hazen, 2005).

Studies examining international students' postgraduate work plans have shown that certain key factors influence these plans. The economic conditions of the home country, wage differences between the host country and the home country, and career and job opportunities in both countries are among the most important of these factors. In addition, political instability in the home country, racial and religious persecution, and avoidance of military service have been linked to students' preference to remain in the host country after graduation (Trevis et al., 2022). According to Hofstede's (2001) cultural diversity theory, individuals from many African, Asian, and Latin American countries tend to have a collectivist orientation, making them more likely to return home to work. In societies that value individualistic and self-reliant individuals, such as Australia, Canada, the U.S., and Western Europe, students are more likely to remain abroad to work (Trice & Yoo, 2007).

According to a study conducted in 2007 at an American university on 497 international graduate students, 77% of participants felt ready to work in their home countries after graduation, but only 32% planned to return to their countries immediately after graduation. Accordingly, the majority of participants also considered working in the United States for a period of time. The study emphasized that the region where they lived and their field of study influenced this decision (Trice & Yoo, 2007:41).

According to the results of Trice and Yoo's (2007) study on international students in the United States, students who were studying in technical fields were more likely to plan to stay because they believed that they would have more opportunities to use the knowledge they acquired in the United States. Furthermore, students from Latin America and Southeast Asia, countries with collectivist values, value strong family ties and feel a strong sense of responsibility to protect and care for their family members. These students plan to return to their countries more often than other students do after graduation. However, this study does not ignore the influence of other factors. It particularly highlights the impact of the student networks to which they belong on their plans to stay (Trice & Yoo, 2007).

According to a study conducted by Alberts and Hazen (2005), international students' intentions to remain in the United States or return to their home countries are based on three main motivations. These are professional, social, and personal factors. Professional factors generally encourage students to stay in the U.S., whereas social and personal factors are more likely to lead them to return to their home countries. The results of this study also indicate that certain patterns exist among national groups. These patterns include the conditions of the country of origin. A study by Arthur and Nunes (2014), specifically on Canada, indicated that the host country is more demanding of international students because it needs a skilled workforce after graduation. Students state that they consider staying in Canada because of the advanced employment opportunities and high standard of living there. The study by Yu (2021) examined the desire of Chinese students to remain in the U.S., the UK, Australia, and Canada and concluded that their desire to remain varied in terms of adaptation, the search for identity, the search for social support, political sensitivity, and self-expression. Netierman et al. (2022) reported similar results for Canada. Although international students want to stay in Canada, it is concluded that most students are influenced by family obligations, the cultural climate in

Canada, the employment opportunities offered to them after graduation, and the possibility of obtaining permanent residence. A study by Koenings et al. (2020) revealed that, in addition to career opportunities and the ability to stay in the host country before starting work, being enrolled in an undergraduate program rather than a graduate program is significantly related to the intention to stay. It was also found that graduate students are significantly more uncertain than undergraduate students are.

METHOD

This study uses descriptive analysis, which consists of four stages: creating a framework for descriptive analysis, processing data according to the thematic framework, and defining and interpreting the findings. This method was chosen because it aims to discover and understand complex phenomena from the subjective perspective of individuals (Creswell, 2020, p. 83; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). The study investigated factors related to an existing situation and how participants were affected by these factors. The data in the study were obtained using a semistructured interview technique. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), qualitative data can be analyzed in two ways: descriptive and content analysis (Cited in: Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). In this study, descriptive analysis was used to reflect the views of individuals by including direct quotations and analyzing them according to a thematic framework (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). This made it possible to identify key themes.

The research was conducted at a well-established research university with a high proportion of international students located in the south-central United States. The study involved interviews with 11 graduate international students who voluntarily agreed to participate in the research. The aim here is to understand human experiences (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008). What is the relationship between these phenomena, which appear in different forms such as events, experiences, perceptions, or situations, and future plans? The answer to this question was sought specifically through the experiences of international graduate students. Numerous studies have been conducted on the challenges faced by international students. The data from these studies are presented above. However, how do these challenges affect students' plans to stay in the country? How do global situations, such as pandemics, or individual circumstances, such as spousal status, shape these challenges? These gaps in the literature will be addressed. In accordance with Hofstede's (2001) cultural diversity theory, the influence of these determinants on stay plans has been questioned.

Sample

In qualitative studies, unlike quantitative studies, statistical representation is not an issue. In this study, a sampling strategy was determined on the basis of the problem, purpose, and research questions. First, purposive sampling was used in this study. It is typically used in qualitative research to select participants for a specific purpose and is quite functional for the researcher (Patton, 2014). Here, international students at the master's and doctoral levels were selected. One type of purposive sampling is maximum diversity sampling. In this study, the aim of sample determination is to have a sample that is not relatively large but can reflect the diversity of participants to the maximum extent (level of education, length of stay in the U.S., country of origin, age, gender, etc.). Data richness is the main goal here. The findings and results that may emerge from such a study can be

richer than those we can achieve with other methods. According to Patton, maximum diversity sampling can achieve two main goals. The first goal is to determine what kinds of similarities exist among diverse situations. The second goal is to detail the sources of diversity among situations related to the selected problem as much as possible and to identify elements that could be sources of diversity among them (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008: 109).

In addition, snowball sampling was also used, prioritizing a trust-based relationship in reaching participants (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008:112). In this study, snowball sampling, which also leverages trust, is considered particularly important for overcoming the reservations of participants from different countries and cultures. International students' own social networks were effective at reaching participants and enabling them to comfortably answer questions through these networks. Maximum variation sampling: Purposive sampling (typical case sampling, maximum variation, snowball sampling, etc.) emerged within the tradition of qualitative research (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2008: 107-108).

Table 1. General information about the participants

Number	Age	Sex	Department	Length of stay in America	Country of origin	Scholarship status	Marital status	Education level
P1	26	M	Electrical engineering	3 years	India	Yes	Single	Doctoral student
P2	28	M	Cyber Security	3 years	Zimbabwe	Yes	Single	Doctoral student
P3	25	M	Petroleum engineering	7 months	China	Yes	Single	Master's student
P4	28	F	Mechanical engineering	8 months	Iranian	Yes	Single	Doctoral student
P5	25	F	Computer Engineering	5 years	Togo	Yes	Single	Master's student
P6	23	M	Computer Engineering	2 months	India	Yes	Single	Master's student
P7	36	M	Anthropology	9 years	Mexico	No	Single	Doctoral student

P8	33	F	Faculty of arts	A year	Venezuela	No	Married	Master's student
P9	31	M	Petroleum engineering	3 years	Azerbaijan	Yes	Single	Doctoral student
P10	31	M	Petroleum engineering	3 years	Nigeria	Yes	Married	Doctoral student
P11	26	F	Business	2 years	Azerbaijan	No	Married	Master's student

Procedure and Ethics

The data collection process took place between September 2023 and June 2024, following approval by the ethics committee. Potential participants were informed about the study and asked to participate voluntarily. Participants were assured that their personal information and collected data would be anonymized, kept confidential, stored securely, and used only for the specific purposes of the current study. The participants were assigned numbers to protect their privacy. Pilot interviews were conducted to test the comprehensibility and reliability of the questions, and these interviews were not included in the study. The interviews were conducted face-to-face in English. The interview questions consisted of approximately 30 questions, excluding those containing demographic data. Each interview lasted from a minimum of 20 minutes to a maximum of one hour. The total number of interviews lasted approximately 8–10 hours. Announcements were made in some classes to reach participants. In some cases, participants were referred to other participants using snowball sampling. With the participants' consent, audio recordings were made during the interviews, and the audio recordings were subsequently transcribed. The transcribed interviews were anonymized and coded, and themes were generated.

The coding process was carried out inductively. Codes were derived from data obtained from the participants. The analysis process was recorded. The raw data obtained, coding notes, and developed themes were documented.

RESULTS

According to the findings of the study, certain factors influence the decision of international graduate students to stay. Chief among these are job opportunities and career prospects. The differences in employment and income conditions between the United States and their home countries are also decisive factors here. Moreover, there appears to be a correlation between the areas in which participants experience difficulties and their decision to stay. Individuals who experience a high level of culture shock and loneliness and for whom this situation persists have a lower desire to stay. This factor should be examined in conjunction with social support situations. Participants who experienced and overcame a high level of difficulty when they first arrived aimed to reap the rewards of their efforts by working in the United States. It was observed that participants who had

family members in the United States, especially those with spouses, had a greater desire to stay. Undoubtedly, when both the literature findings and the participants' statements were examined, important common findings were encountered. The most important factor in the decision to stay is the abundance of job opportunities and future prospects related to the profession.

Coding

The statements of each interviewee were analyzed. As a result, their experiences and the areas where they faced difficulties were coded. The codes identified regarding the difficulties experienced are listed below, numbered and in order:

1. Difficulties related to language proficiency and academic processes
2. Experiences related to cultural adaptation processes
3. Psychological Processes and Social Networks
4. Experiences Related to Economic Status

On the basis of the participants' statements, the codes identified regarding their plans to stay—designated by letters—are as follows:

- a. Economic/career-centered motivation
- b. Comparison with the country of origin
- c. Cultural motivation
- d. Individual motivation

Language Proficiency and Problems Related to Academic Processes.

Participants encountered a series of challenges upon arriving in the United States. One of these areas of difficulty involves language proficiency and challenges related to academic processes. While difficulties with academic processes may be related to language proficiency, they may also stem from differences in educational systems across countries and variations in academic procedures. The following participants described this situation as follows:

P8:

"Ever since I first arrived, my biggest problem has been my language issue. My English isn't very good, but I'm working on it. My husband's English is very good. He went to college here. I don't have any trouble following the classes. My professor is especially helpful. He always asks me how I'm doing. He helps me."

P11:

"The education system here is different. They're always keeping up with the latest developments here. If there is a problem—whether with a course or the students—they immediately make adjustments accordingly. Exams here aren't difficult, but you can pass your courses with consistent study."

P2:

"University processes, in particular, are very different. In our culture, faculty administrators are figures of authority, and you can't just reach them. Here, they'll schedule an appointment right away and say, 'If you have a problem, come to my office,' and you can meet with them. This seemed strange to me at first."

The participants stated that they did not have difficulty reaching senior faculty administrators and academic staff and that although their educational processes differed,

their instructors were helpful. In her 2026 study, Sharma emphasized that institutional support and appreciation from educators are crucial in the integration process of international students (Sharma, 2026). This is a key factor in overcoming challenges related to differences in education. It was noted that language proficiency is a determining factor in academic processes, and this was felt more acutely, especially in the early stages. The following participant specifically highlighted the challenges of the pandemic period.

P5:

“Another challenge that arises in the beginning is the language barrier. We received our education in French in Togo. I struggled a lot with the online system, especially during the pandemic. Afterward, we switched to a hybrid system. Those were difficult times. However, the office hours here were very helpful for me. Whenever I didn’t understand something, I met with the instructor during office hours. I spoke with the instructors, and they answered my questions. Sometimes, while I was speaking, I had to ask them to speak more slowly or speak more slowly myself. Now, five years later, I speak comfortably, of course.”

Since 2020, universities have shifted from in-person learning to online learning because of the pandemic, and while this has created challenges such as social isolation, concentration problems, and zoom fatigue, it has also presented new opportunities for both students and educators. However, the disadvantages created for international students in terms of their academic adaptation processes are noteworthy (Zuo et al, 2026).

Experiences Related to Cultural Adaptation

Initial cultural shock, loneliness, and difficulties in daily life tend to diminish over time; positive social experiences and the development of positive perceptions of the host community, in turn, facilitate students’ adaptation to the country in which they are living. This is seen as one of the key factors that indirectly support international students’ plans to remain in the country after graduation.

P7:

“I experienced culture shock. In regard to eating, I’m used to having regular meals. Mealtimes are very different here. The types of food are different—we use more spices. Now I cook for myself at home. There is more bureaucracy in Mexico. Things are more flexible here compared to there. It’s safer here. In that sense, Mexico is slightly more chaotic. That’s why I feel safe here. Transportation is a real hassle. I’m still dealing with that issue. There is no frequent transportation to every place. You end up having to walk a lot or ask your friends for a ride.”

A significant portion of the participants stated that they experienced culture shock, particularly when they first arrived in the country. While P7 and P10 noted that cultural differences posed challenges as they adapted to their new way of life, P2 also mentioned that adjusting to the different food culture and daily habits was difficult at first. In contrast, P4 stated that although he was aware of cultural differences, this did not pose a serious adjustment problem for him; rather, he cited the climate as the greatest difficulty. This demonstrates that the process of cultural adjustment is experienced to varying degrees among the students.

P2:

"Eating habits are completely different—I'm still struggling with that. There's a supermarket that sells some of our products. If you have a car, it's easy to get there. However, it's two hours away, and without a car—and since public transportation here is very poor, meaning it's very limited—it's very hard to get anywhere. At first, I ordered a lot of food from my home country. Now I know where and how to find things. The culture is very different. It was hard to adjust."

Participant 10 stated that because they had no prior experience living abroad, they experienced loneliness and homesickness during the early stages. In contrast, other participants emphasized the adaptation strategies they developed over time rather than psychological difficulties. These findings demonstrate that the psychological adaptation processes of international students can vary depending on individual experience.

P10:

"I had never been abroad before. When I first arrived, I felt a little lonely and homesick. I experienced culture shock. It was a bit strange for me because this place seemed super clean. Everywhere seemed very clean."

P:4

"I've been here for 8 months. There are many cultural differences. However, I can't say there's one specific area where I've struggled the most—the weather is very different, and that's the biggest challenge. It's very hot here in the summer and very cold in the winter. As for eating habits, I haven't had much trouble, but they are different."

P11:

"I also enjoy living here. People here are reserved but warm. They're honest, and they say 'thank you' for everything. I didn't realize how religious they were until I came here. I thought family ties weren't strong, but that's not the case. I didn't have any trouble adjusting when I first arrived. Since I'd watched many American movies, I knew what to expect. It turned out just as I'd imagined. I haven't experienced anything bad. I haven't had any safety concerns. The only thing is that there are many homeless people here. You have to be careful. There are no homeless people in my country. There's crime here, too. That surprised me. I was surprised to see how that could be in such a wealthy country."

P:9

"Before coming to America, nothing had failed to meet my expectations. From what I'd seen in movies, people here are more open and relaxed. I thought the concept of family did not exist here. However, that was not the case. As I got to know my girlfriend's family, I saw that they were a better family than we are. They treat children like children. Here, they see them as individuals and even listen to their jokes. I was truly surprised to see all this. We're much closer-knit. Here, everything is very restricted. My girlfriend's family paid for her tuition, and she felt indebted to them. I think this sense of responsibility instilled in their children is also a good thing."

P7:

"It was a culture shock. As for food, I'm used to eating at regular times. Mealtimes are very different here. The types of food are different—we use more spices. Now I cook for myself at home. There is more bureaucracy in Mexico. Things are more flexible here compared to there. It's safer here. In that sense, Mexico is slightly more

chaotic. That's why I feel safe here. Transportation is a real hassle. I'm still dealing with that problem. There is no frequent transportation to every place. You end up having to walk a lot or ask your friends for a ride."

The participants also noted that their preconceptions about the host society had changed significantly. P11 and P9 stated that they had different expectations regarding family structure and religious life before coming to the United States but that these perceptions had changed as a result of their daily life experiences. Both participants noted that family ties were stronger than they had anticipated and that society was warmer than they had expected. In addition, while P11 expressed surprise because of the high number of homeless people and the prevalence of crime in the country, P7 stated that he found the United States safer than his home country did. These assessments demonstrate that students constantly make comparisons between their country of origin and the host country during their adjustment processes.

Psychological Processes and Social Networks

The psychological challenges associated with being an immigrant are a significant area of difficulty for international students. The findings indicate that the presence and strength of social networks enable them to cope with these challenges more easily.

P:11

"My spouse is Azerbaijani; there's no one else here—just my spouse. I'm thinking of working here after I graduate. It's very hard to find a job in Azerbaijan."

Moreover, social networks (particularly spouses or partners) are seen to strongly influence their plans to stay. According to Hofstede's (2001) theory of cultural diversity, family ties (marital status) are important determinants of the plan to stay.

P2:

"The reason I chose this university was because I had the opportunity to receive a scholarship, so that's why I came here. I also mentor international students here. I faced many challenges, especially when I first arrived. There are five students from my home country. I'm an outgoing person. I have many friends from very different countries. However, it was hard at first. I don't have any family members here. Because, frankly, almost everything was different from my home country. It was very hard for me to learn the institutional processes. However, everyone takes different classes. In addition, while you communicate in class, they don't talk to you after class is over. At first, this made me depressed, and I felt very lonely. If you don't have friends or someone to help you with cultural issues, you struggle. I'm doing better now. I'm happy here. I don't have any plans for after graduation yet. My only goal right is now to graduate. After that, I'll make plans about where to live and work. I have short-term plans, and I stick to them. Even if better opportunities come up, I'll stick to that plan. I work very hard."

This participant's statement highlights the decisive role of economic motivation in the university selection process. Although the participants mentioned experiencing difficulties initially with cultural adjustment, social support mechanisms, and academic processes, they stated that they overcame these challenges by creating opportunities for

socialization. They also experienced difficulties stemming from the absence of family members in the United States and cultural differences. The participants stated that they faced many challenges in the early days, such as issues with the institutional system, meals, transportation, and loneliness. They expressed uncertainty about the decision to stay. They noted that they were able to cope with the difficulties over time and stated that they would make the decision to stay based on the circumstances they would encounter.

P3.

"I didn't experience any adjustment issues when I first arrived. I felt a bit lonely at first, but not to a serious extent. My friends are in many different countries. I'm an outgoing person. I chose this university because the petroleum engineering department ranked in the top five in terms of university rankings. I received a scholarship. I did not have any problems with the university's educational system because the university is very organized, attentive, and systematic. I plan to stay here in the future and work as an engineer."

According to the findings of this interview, the participant stated that he experienced a low level of difficulty, but his initial experiences were positive. Furthermore, it is evident that his decision to stay is clear. Receiving a scholarship and having high academic motivation appear to have been influential factors here.

P4:

"We felt a bit of loneliness and homesickness. That was the greatest challenge. After graduation, I'll work wherever I can find a good job. It's not a must to return to Iran; the job is what matters to me."

The participants reported that they experienced moderate difficulties. Cultural differences were noted in particular but were not identified as highly significant factors. The participants mentioned experiencing loneliness and homesickness, in addition to factors such as weather conditions and diet. However, these difficulties are not severe. It was noted that economic and professional motivation (Code: a) are important and play a decisive role in the decision to stay. The decision to stay is not clear cut. It was described as a strategic and rational decision.

P5:

"I don't have any close relatives here; I have an uncle, but he lives far away. I chose this university because I received a scholarship. When I first arrived, I faced a wide variety of challenges. First, I tried to determine how social relationships work here. People are very busy. Most of the time, you just exchange greetings. I truly felt the need for friendly conversation. I also missed home and my family a lot. I looked for the kind of communication I was used to here. Everything is so much easier when you have someone you can relax with, have fun with, and cry with. After going through all these challenges, I want to stay and work in the U.S. once I graduate. When I first arrived, my goal was to return to my home country, but..."

Many areas of difficulty are clearly intertwined here; however, over time, a strong process of adaptation has taken place. Furthermore, the migrants' intentions clearly changed over time, evolving from "returning" to "staying." In this regard, this can be cited as an example of a participant profile whose return plans have changed. The participants stated that in the early days, they experienced difficulties with language, academic processes, loneliness, and the resulting adaptation challenges. Here, too, it is

evident that one of the primary motivations for coming was economic (code: a). It appears that individual-based motivation played a role in the decision to stay (code: d). It appears that they plan to stay as a result of successfully navigating these challenging processes.

P6:

"We don't generally have any adjustment issues. There was a bit of loneliness at first, but it's fine now. The only problem is food. We use many spices, and it took some time to find them here. However, it's not truly a big deal. We don't have any family members here. We have friends from all over the world, but we're closer to the Indians. Our work plans may change depending on future circumstances. For now, our plan is to return to India to work."

The participants stated that they experienced only minor adjustment difficulties and noted that they had largely adapted. Their thoughts regarding their plans to stay are unclear. They indicated that decisions will be made on a case-by-case basis as the situation unfolds and that for now, they have plans to return.

P8:

"I feel comfortable here. However, my family is in Venezuela, and I miss them very much. Everyone is very hospitable. Sometimes I feel lonely. I don't have many friends here. I have no relatives at all. However, being with my husband is comforting. We came here together. My husband is pursuing a Ph.D., and I am working on my master's degree. We're thinking of staying here. It depends on the opportunities. There are plenty of opportunities here. That's why I don't think we'll return to my home country. "Maybe we'll go to Canada, too. It depends on my husband's job situation."

Participant 8's statements indicate that they are experiencing common challenges in the immigration process—such as loneliness, language barriers, and homesickness—but also reflect spousal support, academic support, and a strong, opportunity-focused approach toward the future. From Hofstede's (2001) perspective, social networks, especially the presence of a spouse, have been interpreted as important support systems for coping with difficulties encountered. Although the participants faced challenges, they stated that these challenges did not negatively affect their decision to stay; in contrast, they wanted to stay because of the opportunities and were even considering different options (such as Canada). Therefore, while the decision to stay may be uncertain, we see that economic motivation and opportunity-based (code: a) expectations are decisive factors in the decision to stay. While the lack of social ties and loneliness were highlighted among the challenges faced here, the presence of a spouse is seen as a significant motivator.

P10:

"I came here alone. My family is in Nigeria. I was single when I arrived, but I got married a year ago. My husband is also Nigerian; we had met before I came here. I have a full scholarship at this university. It's enough for us; we don't have any financial difficulties. My husband doesn't work because his visa status doesn't allow him to work. I had never been abroad before. When I first arrived, I felt a bit lonely and homesick. I experienced culture shock. After I graduate, I want to work in Houston. I want to stay in the U.S. after I graduate. I want to work here."

Here, the participant expressed her immigration experience in a balanced and compelling manner. She described facing significant challenges during her early days here, including loneliness, culture shock, and differences in the educational process. Her plans for staying are clear and career focused (code: a).

Experiences Related to Economic Conditions

Economic conditions, of course, have a significant effect on international students' experiences and plans for staying in the country. This is particularly evident in the fact that the majority of participants emphasized that receiving a scholarship was a decisive factor in their decisions. Furthermore, the availability of job opportunities and career prospects was strongly emphasized in their plans to stay.

P1:

"Public transportation here is very limited. I use Uber, but it's very expensive. I want to stay in the U.S. after I graduate. I believe I'll have better job opportunities here compared to India..."

The participants' statements indicate that they faced certain challenges when they first arrived in the U.S. One of these challenges was financial. They also mentioned that they plan to stay. The participants' primary motivation here is their comparison between their home country and the U.S., and their belief that there are more job opportunities in the U.S. It is evident that financial motivation has influenced their decision to stay.

P7:

"When I first arrived here, I only knew the professor who invited me. I didn't know anyone else. At first, I felt very lonely. I kept telling myself to stay positive. In addition, everything seemed so expensive. It still does. It was hard. I'm also working as a teaching assistant here. I'm covering my expenses. I have many plans for after I graduate. Since I'm studying here, there are certain career paths I can pursue here, or I might return home—it depends on the situation. I'm comfortable here, but I'd be comfortable if I went back, too. There are archaeology programs in Latin America as well—that could be an option."

Participant 7's statements exemplify a multifaceted process. The significant difficulties experienced at the beginning have gradually given way to adaptation. While some indecision regarding plans to stay is evident, a range of options is outlined. The participants tried to cope with the challenges they faced. Loneliness and psychological difficulties were addressed through individual effort (self-reassurance). It appears that some of the difficulties are still ongoing (such as economic hardships). The decision to stay is not clear. It was stated that planning (codes: a, d) would depend on available opportunities.

P9:

"When I first arrived, I faced financial difficulties until my scholarship was approved. I had some savings from my previous job, so I used those. It's very competitive here. Major companies are based here, and some of the world's leading firms are here. After I graduate, if I receive an offer here, my goal is to work for a while and then return to serve my own country. Moving to another country is difficult for my girlfriend. We don't know how we'll manage that. Of course, all our decisions

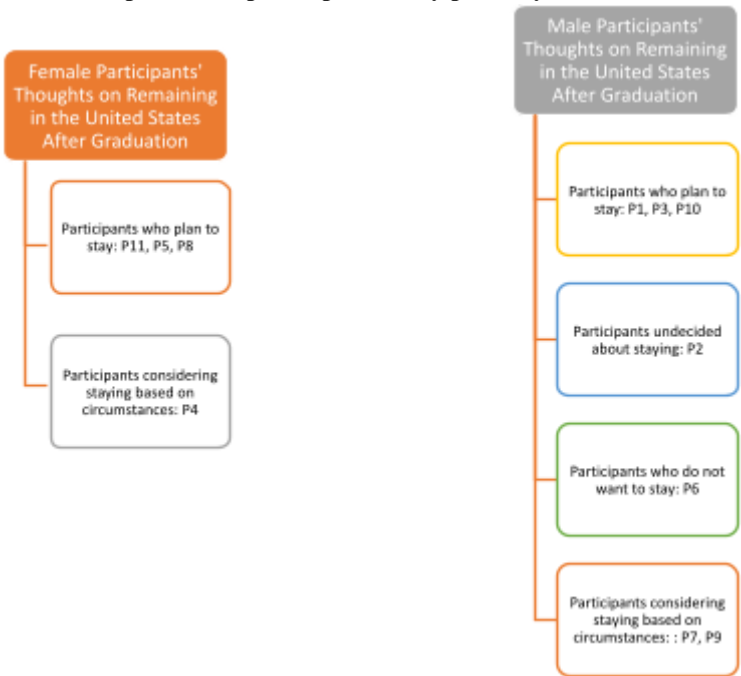
depend on our financial situation. I also want her to travel to different regions and learn about different cultures.”

The participants’ immigration experience was shaped by personal relationships and cross-cultural interactions. Initially, difficulties were encountered in many areas, but adaptation was achieved over time. Economic and opportunity-based motivations (Code: a) are seen as decisive factors in the decision to stay. Additionally, plans to return to the country of origin in the long term to serve it (Code: c) were expressed. A tendency toward semipermanence is observed.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

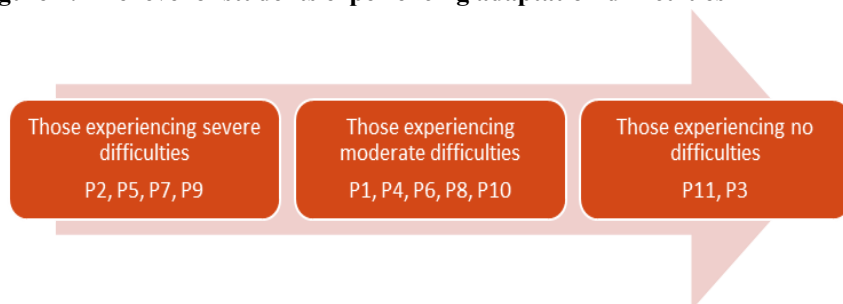
When the data were analyzed, 6 participants stated that they definitely planned to stay (Figure 1). One participant stated that they did not explicitly plan to stay. One participant was undecided, and three participants stated that they might have remained undecided if the conditions were suitable. Some participants stated that although they did not initially plan to stay, they had begun making plans to stay (Example: 7). Participants with social support (spouses and partners) experienced less loneliness and expressed their plans to stay more definitively. From Hofstede's (2001) perspective, social networks, especially the presence of a spouse, have been interpreted as important support systems for coping with difficulties encountered. Among female participants, there are those who are not thinking of remaining definitively or who are undecided.

Figure 1: Relationship between participants' stay plans by sex



Structural problems in the country of origin (unemployment, economic crisis, etc.) have also affected plans to stay. Cultural shock and loneliness have been the most frequently mentioned difficulties, and this situation has affected plans to stay. In addition, family structure, eating habits, transportation, and language problems are the most frequently highlighted problem areas. Academic support has a positive effect on decision-making. The interest of the professors, their accessibility, and the flexibility of the system were presented as positive experiences. Economic stability affects permanence, and the greatest factors in the decision to stay in the United States are job opportunities and career prospects.

Figure 2: The level of students experiencing adaptation difficulties



Participants who stated that they did not experience any difficulties when they came to America indicated that they definitely plan to stay. One of those who stated that they experienced moderate difficulties (P6) was not considering staying. P1, P10, and P8 plan to stay, whereas P4 has indicated that they may stay depending on the circumstances. Among the participants who experienced high levels of difficulty, one (P2) was undecided about remaining. One (P5) plans to stay and stated that this plan is a response to the difficulties they experienced. The other two participants stated that they might stay depending on the circumstances.

In conclusion, this study reveals a relationship between the difficulties experienced by international graduate students studying in the United States upon their initial arrival, their social support status, and their future plans to stay. The data show that despite individual differences, relational support and economic stability in particular have a positive effect on plans to stay. The most fundamental motivation for staying is work and career opportunities.

SUGGESTIONS

This study has two main points. The first goal is to reveal the situations that postgraduate international students encounter upon their initial arrival. The second goal is to determine whether these experiences influence their decision to stay. Recommendations have been shaped within this framework. First, it is important that policy measures for international students are holistic, long-term, and inclusive. Since measures aimed at integration processes are decisive in students' plans to stay, they are a factor that strengthens economic, social, and human capital for countries.

In addition to orientation programs and academic support programs for international students, which are available at almost all universities, it is important to diversify mentoring systems and expand intercultural activities. In this way, it is thought that both the academic competence process and isolation, which is among the common integration difficulties of almost all international students, are accelerated.

- Expanding access to multilingual counseling services and mental health centers for international students;
- Facilitating administrative and legal processes, ensuring access to information and support centers through various platforms, and including international students in policy and institutional processes;
- Establishing support funds while taking into account unexpected economic difficulties;
- Finally, diversifying awareness and education services for local students and the public are considered important. These studies provide policymakers with data on the basis of the identified findings. Therefore, enriching the diversity and scope of these studies is important.

LIMITATIONS

The main limitation of this study is that it covers only the experiences of international graduate students at a single university. Therefore, the results of this study cannot be generalized. To gain a clearer understanding of the relationship between international students' experiences and their plans to stay, it is necessary to conduct studies on students at a larger number of universities in different regions. Furthermore, since participants' personal experiences were included in the study, their biases may also be reflected in their statements. In addition, although there was no time limit in the interviews, participants may have felt time constraints or experienced individual difficulties because the interviews were not conducted in their native language. These issues constitute potential limitations of the study.

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