

Adjustment Challenges of International Students: Implications for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

International students are confronted with copious challenges as they endeavor to study abroad. This study investigates the adjustment challenges international students encounter as they transition to their new environment, and the coping mechanisms or adaptation strategies they use to survive the challenges they experience. The role of the social worker in helping international students adjust, and collaborating with appropriate college offices to strategically position themselves to support international students is also discussed. A mixed method of study was utilized. A modified version of the Michigan International Students Problem Inventory (MISPI) was used in addition to data collected through survey questionnaires. Descriptive and inferential statistical methods (mean, standard deviation, *t*-test, and One Factor ANOVA) were used to analyze the data. This paper is an extension of my doctoral dissertation. While drawing on useful literature and other important information from my dissertation for the analysis, the work is also different from many perspectives in terms of new scholarly sources, enhanced ideas, and analyses. Results of the study revealed several challenges international students encountered with racism, discrimination and relationship between faculty and students being the greatest. It is imperative for social workers to support institutions to provide resources that caters to the specific needs of international students. Creating a positive and welcoming environment is crucial for the efficacious adjustment of international students.

Keywords: international students, domestic students, host institutions, adjustment.

1. Introduction/Background

1.1 International Students

International students can be defined as “Students who undertake all or part of their higher education experience in a country other than their home country or who travel across a national boundary to a country other than their home country to undertake all or part of their higher education experience.” (Institute of International Education, 2019).

1.2 International students in the US

The number of international students worldwide has steadily increased with about 6.3 million students enrolled in colleges and universities worldwide in the year 2020 (Migration Data Portal [MDP], 2023). Historically, the United States [US] has been the largest destination country for international students (Migration Policy Institute [MPI], 2021) with almost 1.1 million international students enrolled in the 2019/2020 academic year. Top ranking institutions such as Harvard, MIT, Yale, Princeton, University of Pennsylvania, Cornell, and Stanford, are significant factors which makes the US the preferred study abroad destination (MPI, 2017).

Data from Statista (2023) indicates that the institution with the largest number of international student enrollment in the 2021/2022 academic year was New York University (21,081), followed by Northeastern University (17,836), Columbia University (16,956), University of Southern California (15,729), and Arizona State University (15,293). Students from China (290,086) constitute the largest portion of international students enrolled in the US, followed by India (199,182), South Korea (40,755), Canada (27,013), and Vietnam (20,713) (Statista, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted international students enrollment in the US. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement [ICE] reported a 72% decrease in new international students enrollment in the year 2020, and a 91% decrease in new F-1 international students enrollment (ICE, 2022). Closure of US embassies in foreign countries, visa delays and denials, a challenging political environment, and increasing cost of higher education are some of the factors that account for the decrease in international students enrollment.

International students choose to study abroad in a different country different from theirs for several reasons such as the global rankings of the institutions, difficulty in accessing higher education in their country of origin, influence or recommendations of family and friends, promotional and marketing activities of institutions in foreign countries, lack of technology-based programs in their country of origin, international career opportunities, and several others (Bamber, 2014; Jiani, 2017; Marginson & Van der Wende, 2007; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

1.3 Significance of Study

Colleges and universities throughout the US are recording a decline in both graduate and undergraduate enrollment, and the same can be said of international student enrollment.

Recruitment and retention of students have become an arduous task. This study is important in helping institutions identify challenges international students encounter, provide practical solutions, and build a positive, inclusive, and thriving environment for students which will consequently ensure successful student recruitment and retention.

1.4 Importance of International Students

International students contribute substantially to science and innovation, financially to the economy and bring a wealth of cultural benefits to campuses. According to Association of International Educators [NAFSA], 2018, international students contributed \$39 billion (revenue from SEVIS and visa processing) to the U.S. economy, \$42.4 billion in export revenue and generated 455,622 jobs in the U.S. in the 2017/2018 academic year (NAFSA, 2018). Proceeds from international students expenditure on food, clothing, cars, etc., can be termed as export revenue (Okai, 2020).

Douglass & Edelstein (2009) asserts that international students contribute more than 15% of Australia's higher education tuition revenue, and New Zealand depends highly on international students fees to support higher education (Douglas & Edelstein, 2009). In the United Kingdom, export revenue from education related services increased to \$24, 267 billion in the year 2014 (U.K. Department of Education Research Report, 2017), and international students contributed \$33.367 billion to the economy in the year 2015 (IIE, Open Doors, 2019). Intellectually, international students also contribute significantly to America's science and innovation. Data from the National Foundation for American Policy [NFAP] indicates that international students' enrollment in the STEM fields is significantly higher than local students enrollment. Sustaining key graduate programs in the US will be impossible without international students (NFAP, 2021). In the US, international students enrollment constituted 82% in petroleum engineering, 74% in electrical engineering, 72% in computer and information sciences, 71% in industrial and manufacturing engineering, 70% in statistics, 67% in economics, and 61% in civil engineering. (NFAP, 2021).

International students also add to the diversity of the economy and communities as they bring valuable and diverse culture and customs to the institutions and country at large. Institutions have the added benefits of economies of scale stemming from the increase in the number of admitted students, resulting in reduced cost of providing tuition (Baker, Creedy, & Johnson, 1996). Sharma & Mulka (1993) notes that the interaction of local and international students encourages local students to take advantage of career opportunities globally as they now have a more holistic worldview and are more cosmopolitan. Faculty members with international education and experience are greatest assets to the institutions and communities as they bring their experience and knowledge to the classroom and community (Hegarty, 2014; IIE, Open Doors, 2019; & Sharma, & Mulka, 1993). On the contrary, Banjong (2016), argues that the presence of international students robs local students of grants, scholarships, and employment opportunities.

1.5 Challenges Experienced by International Students

Despite the tremendous benefits and contributions that international students present to their

host country, Lee (2007) explains that they are met with a hostile political environment, enactment and promotion of anti- globalist policies, racism, and several other challenges that daunts and frustrates their efforts. The student's cultural background, however, sometimes determines the extent, or plays a role in the challenges students experience (Jung, Hecht, & Wadsworth, 2007; Rahman & Rollock, 2004; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008). Hanassab (2006) speculates that students from Middle Eastern Countries experience more prejudice and discrimination than students from European countries. Chen and Yang (2014) adds that size and location of the college may also determine the challenges of students. This paper proceeds by discussing the challenges faced by international students which includes visa processing, culture shock, language, racism and discrimination, isolation and loneliness, academic and financial challenges.

Visa Status

International students visas come with lots of restrictions. Limited hours to work, and working only on campuses are just a few of the restrictions. Depending on the country of origin, some international students are issued single entry visas (e.g., students from Iran) which restricts them from travelling outside of the U.S whiles they're studying (Israel & Batlova, 2021; Fischer, 2019; & USCIS, 2023).

Culture Shock

The strain of acclimatizing to a new environment is a significant stressor for international students (Hirai et al., 2015). Culture shock sets in as international students realize that their usual way of life; cultural values, socialization, language, style of dressing, weather, food, among others will be altered in their new environment (Okai, 2020). The difficulty of enduring in a different cultural environment is what (Townsend & Poh, 2008) refers to as culture shock which usually causes daily emotional crisis and mental health issues among international students.

Language

Language poses as a significant challenge in the adjustment of international students (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). "Students with little or no background in English are obliged to write, speak, and communicate fluently in English, which sometimes can be frustrating to the international students and their instructors too" (Okai, 2020, p.4) Even students who originally come from English speaking countries face challenges with articulation expressed as accents, resulting in difficulty in communicating and understanding (Galloway, & Jenkins, 2009). This, and the unaccustomed academic educational system (Wang, 2004) tremendously causes academic challenges to international students.

Racism and Discrimination

International students experience racism and discrimination from the federal government in the form of harsh political and immigration policies and regulations. They also experience racism from their professors, and local students (Okai, 2020). They are discriminated against and stereotyped as "generalized other" (Urban & Orbe, 2007, p.128), a culturally awkward,

distressed, and naïve homogenous group (Spencer-Rodgers, 2001), and considered cultural outsiders. International students also experience discrimination from the media as they are portrayed negatively through higher education publications (Rhee & Sagaria, 2004).

Isolation and Loneliness

Insufficient support systems in host countries, and being separated from families and friends causes international students to experience loneliness and isolation which significantly impact their physical and mental health (Thurber & Walton, 2012). Townsend and Poh (2008) postulates that another cause of loneliness for international students is the difficulty of making friends in their new environment owing to differences in culture.

Academic Challenges

International students anticipate an enhancement of their analytical and creative problem-solving skills through their interactions with foreign students and faculty (Cho & Morris, 2015). Sadly, the academic performance of international students is generally lower than their expectations compared to their performance in their country of origin. This low performance stems from the intricacy of learning in a non-native language, difficulties arising from unfamiliarity with the US academic system in the US, and accustoming to the new educational environment (Wang, 2004).

Financial Challenges

International students experience financial challenges as their visa status makes them ineligible for federal financial aid and limits how much they can work. They also pay higher tuition cost than domestic students, yet domestic students enjoy government support and subsidy that international students don't (Larbi, et al, 2022; Laframboise et al, 2023; & Wilson et al, 2022).

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on all students especially international students (Al-Oraibi, et al, 2022). As colleges and universities shut down their campuses and dormitories, and transitioned to online learning (Ihm, et al, 2021), international students were left on their own without any support to look for housing at a time where the nation was under lock down. International students lost their jobs and houses since their visa allowed them to work only on their college campuses (Gomes, et al, 2021). This had extreme financial consequences for them which severely impacted their mental health. International students experienced extreme loneliness and isolation as they were separated from families abroad and locally (Malet-Calvo, et al, 2022). Even though the federal guidance passed in June 2020 by ICE mandating international students to return to their country of origin if taking all classes online was rescinded later that same year, "international students continue to live in fear and uncertainty of what the future holds for them in the US." (Okai, 2020. p.31).

2. Research Questions

The three research questions that guided this study are; "1. What are the key adjustment

challenges international students encounter as they study at West Virginia University? 2. What are the student's perception of WVU's role in addressing the adjustment challenges they encounter? 3. What coping mechanisms or adaptation strategies do international students use to survive the adjustment challenges in West Virginia University?" (Okai, 2020, p.45) This study was approved by the West Virginia University Institutional Review Board with protocol number 1906605405.

2.1 Methodology

The U curve theory of adjustment [UCT] developed by Lysgaard in 1955 was used to guide this study. The UCT "gives a realistic expectation of the process of adjustment and establishes the need for developing coping mechanisms", it has been "widely used to confirm adjustment challenges that individuals experience" (Okai, 2020. p.33). His study among 200 Fulbright Norwegian students studying in the US revealed that adjustment was a function of time. The first stage of the adjustment process in any new environment according to Lysgaard's UCT is the honeymoon stage. In this stage, the individual is mesmerized and fascinated by the differences and similarities of the new environment and culture. The culture shock stage follows as the individual begins to experience hostility and stereotyping, causing homesickness and the excitement of the new environment to wear off. The third stage is the adjustment stage. At this stage, the individual begins to familiarize himself with the new cultural norms and is learning to adjust. The final stage, the mastery stage is where the individual has fully adapted to the new environment.

2.2 Survey Instrument

A mixed method of study was utilized for this research. An online survey comprising of open-ended and closed-ended questions (see Okai, 2020, appendix C) and the Michigan International Students Problem Inventory [MISPI] was administered together with informal conversations. The MISPI, revised in 1977 was originally created by John W. Porter and A. D. Haller (Wang, 2004). It has been widely used in numerous studies identifying international students challenges on several college campuses (Wang, 2004; & Atebe, 2011), The MISPI was the most appropriate instrument to use for this study. The MISPI was modified for the purpose of this study, the number of items were reduced to 24 from the original 132 items. Some questions were eliminated and others added to address specific questions of this study. The 24 items were divided into 8 problem areas to guide this study in identifying adjustment challenges of international students at WVU. Students also rated their perception of how WVU assists in addressing their challenges on a scale of 1 to 7.

Gay & Airasian (2000) defines instrument reliability as "the degree to which an instrument measures what it is supposed to measure and permits appropriate interpretation of results" (p.169), and "Content validity is the degree to which a test measures an intended area" (Gay & Airasian, 2000, p. 163). According to Porter (1966), the items on the MISPI measures specific challenges international students encounter. Spaulding & Flack (1976) echoes that the MISPI is a reliable instrument, it "is a quick and reliable way of identifying problems perceived by students on an individual campus" (Spaulding & Flack 1976, p.33).

All international students enrolled at WVU in the Fall 2019 and Spring 2020 semesters were given the opportunity to take part in the study.

2.3 Demographics of Survey Participants

A total of 220 students took part in the online survey. 48% ($n = 95$) of the respondents were male and 52% ($n = 104$) were female. Equal numbers of the respondents 50% ($n = 99$) were graduates and 50% ($n = 99$) undergraduates. 20% ($n = 40$) were 20 years or less, 47% ($n = 93$) were between the ages of 21 and 25 years, and 33% ($n = 65$) were 26 years and above. 17% ($n = 33$) had no dependents and 83% ($n = 164$) had dependents. 33% ($n = 65$) had experience in other colleges in the US before enrolling at WVU and 67% ($n = 132$) had no experience. 51% ($n = 100$) had been enrolled at WVU for at least 1 yr, 29% ($n = 56$) between 1 and 3 yrs, and 20% ($n = 39$) for 3 yrs and over.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is “the descriptive or inferential statistical test and procedures you used, how they were treated, and the level of statistical significance that guided your analysis” (Roberts, 2010 p.158). For this study, descriptive and inferential statistical methods (mean, mode, standard deviation, t -test, and One Factor ANOVA analysis) were used to analyze the data.

2.5 Research Design

For research question 1 ***What are the key adjustment challenges international students encounter as they study at West Virginia University?***, 24 Likert scale questions were used. Students were asked to rate the extent of their challenges based on the difference between their expectations of those challenges and actual experiences encountered. The 24 challenges were grouped into 8 main problem areas; admission selection, orientation service, personal/social, financial, language, immigration, religious, and health challenges” (Okai, 2020).

The ratings of the Likert scale questions were; 7= Much greater challenge than expected, 6= Greater challenge than expected, 5 = Somewhat expected, 4 = Neutral-Exactly what I expected, 3 = Easier than expected, 2 = Much easier than expected, 1 = No challenge at all, (Okai, 2020). The results of each challenge, mean, and standard deviation, was analyzed and compared (see Okai, 2020, appendix D). The table below shows the summary descriptive statistics, means, and standard deviations.

Table 1. Survey Response Mean and Standard Deviation for International Students Challenges

Item	Challenge	M	SD	Confidence Interval (\pm)
1	Differences between U.S. and Home Country Education System	4.61	1.58	0.22
2	Orientation to WVU	4.59	1.52	0.21
3	Relationship with international student advisor	4.31	1.82	0.25
4	Attitude of some students towards international students	4.77	1.64	0.23
5	Attitude of some U.S. citizens to skin color	4.45	1.89	0.26
6	Relationship between faculty and students	4.88	1.64	0.23
7	Treatment received at social functions	4.60	1.50	0.21
8	Being accepted in social groups	4.75	1.62	0.23
9	Insufficient personal- social counseling	4.20	1.49	0.21
10	Unexpected financial needs	3.98	1.77	0.25
11	Finding employment between semesters	3.86	1.77	0.25
12	Lack of money to meet expenses	3.88	1.68	0.24
13	Speaking English	4.66	1.90	0.27
14	Ability to write English	4.83	1.89	0.27
15	Understanding lectures in English	4.87	1.93	0.27
16	Immigration regulations	4.33	1.69	0.24
17	Immigration work restrictions	3.99	1.93	0.27
18	Finding part time work	3.72	1.75	0.25
19	Finding a worship group of own faith	3.89	1.73	0.24
20	Religion and morals in the U. S	4.07	1.78	0.25
21	Religious practices in U. S	4.10	1.72	0.24
22	Finding adequate health services	4.19	1.81	0.26
23	Dietary problems	4.25	1.73	0.24
24	Feeling stressed	4.32	1.86	0.26

Source: Okai, 2020.

From the table above, *relationship between faculty and students* (item 6) was the challenge with the highest mean (M) of $M = 4.88$, indicating the greatest challenge students encountered at WVU. This is closely followed by *understanding lectures in English* (item 15) with a mean of $M = 4.87$ and *ability to write in English* (item 14), with a mean of $M = 4.83$. Other challenges students ranked high were *attitude of some students toward international students*, *being accepted into social groups*, and *treatment received at social functions*. *Finding part time work* was the least challenge experienced by students.

In addition to the Likert-Scale questions, students recounted several other challenges (see Okai, 2020, appendix G) in response to the open-ended questions in the survey such as housing challenges, transportation challenges, mental health issues, health insurance challenges, difficulty in setting up a bank account, getting a driver's license, orientation challenges, discrimination from faculty, difficult relationships with advisors, etc.

Face to face interviews. Informal conversations were also conducted among 12 international students in this study. All 12 students reported racism and discrimination specifically from professors. Other challenges are lack of affordable day care for their children, expensive health insurance, difficult eligibility requirements for scholarships, assistantships and funding, loneliness, lack of international grocery stores, and lack of familiar religious groups, and transportation challenges.

For research question 2. *What are the students' perceptions of West Virginia University's role in addressing the adjustment challenges they encounter?*, students were asked again through the survey to rank how WVU assists them in meeting their challenges on a scale of 1-7 : The ratings of the Likert scale used was: 7= Much better than expected, 6= Better than expected, 5 = Somewhat better than expected, 4 = Neutral-Exactly as I expected, 3 = Less than expected, 2 = Much less than expected , 1 = No assistance at all. The result of each response, mean, and standard deviation, was analyzed and compared (see Okai, 2020, appendix H). Table 2 below shows the summary descriptive statistics, means, and standard deviations.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Responses to WVU Assistance with Challenges of International Students (Higher means indicates WVU was more helpful)

Item	Addressing Challenges	Mean	SD	Confidence Interval(±)
1	Differences between U.S. and Home Country Education System	4.58	1.69	0.25
2	Orientation to WVU	4.81	1.63	0.24
3	Relationship with international student advisor	4.30	1.99	0.29
4	Attitude of some students towards	4.62	1.81	0.27

international students

5	Attitude of some U.S. citizens to skin color	4.44	1.90	0.28
6	Relationship between faculty and students	4.86	1.76	0.26
7	Treatment received at social functions	4.53	1.67	0.25
8	Being accepted in social groups	4.51	1.74	0.26
9	Insufficient personal- social counseling	4.16	1.66	0.25
10	Unexpected financial needs	3.64	1.85	0.28
11	Finding employment between semesters	3.63	1.74	0.26
12	Lack of money to meet expenses	3.62	1.82	0.27
13	Speaking English	4.77	1.73	0.26
14	Ability to write English	4.98	1.65	0.24
15	Understanding lectures in English	5.00	1.64	0.24
16	Immigration regulations	4.45	1.71	0.25
17	Immigration work restrictions	3.88	1.89	0.28
18	Finding part time work	3.55	1.78	0.26
19	Finding a worship group of own faith	3.96	1.87	0.28
20	Religion and morals in the U. S	3.97	1.82	0.27
21	Religious practices in U. S	4.11	1.80	0.27
22	Finding adequate health services	3.98	1.89	0.28
23	Dietary problems	3.76	1.83	0.27
24	Feeling stressed	3.90	1.92	0.28

Source: Okai, 2020.

Table 2 above shows that students ranked *understanding lectures in English* (item 15) as the challenge that WVU was assisting them address the most, followed by *ability to write in English* (item 14) and *relationship between faculty and students*. The challenge students perceived WVU to be addressing the least was *finding part time work* (item 18).

Research question 3. *What coping mechanisms or adaptation strategies do international students use to survive the adjustment challenges in West Virginia University?* Questions 3-6 from the international students survey used for this study was helpful in identifying coping mechanisms and resources students used. Question 3, which comprised an 11 Likert

scale questions asked students to rank on a scale of 1-5 how helpful they found the resources listed. The ratings of the Likert scale questions were 1= not at all, 2= very little, 3= neutral, 4= somewhat helpful, and 5= very helpful. (Okai, 2020). The result of each rating for all survey respondents (N=220), mean, standard deviation and descriptive analysis of all 11 resources was analyzed and compared (see Okai, 2020, appendix K).

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Responses to WVU Resources

No.	Resources	Mean	SD	Confidence (±)
1	International Student Organizations	3.48	1.28	0.18
2	Academic Advisor or Major Professor	3.79	1.27	0.18
3	Other International Students	4.04	1.12	0.15
4	American Students	3.35	1.31	0.18
5	Local Campus Groups	2.86	1.22	0.17
6	Office of Diversity & Inclusion	2.81	1.29	0.18
7	International Students & Scholars Services	3.46	1.28	0.18
8	Writing Studio	2.92	1.30	0.18
9	Student Orientation	3.29	1.26	0.17
10	Staff	3.73	1.14	0.16
11	Instructors	3.76	1.15	0.16

Source: Okai, 2020.

From the analysis above, students ranked *other international students* (item 3) as the most helpful resource with a highest mean of $M = 4.04$, followed by *Academic Advisor and Major Professor* (Item 2) with a mean of $M = 3.79$, and *Instructors* (Item 11) with a mean of $M = 3.76$. Students ranked *The Office of Diversity & Inclusion* (Item 6) as the least helpful resource with a mean of $M = 2.81$.

Question 4 of the survey asked students to identify other resources provided by WVU that they utilized and found helpful. This is presented in figure 1 below. Students stated the *Carruth Center for Psychological and Psychiatric Services* as the most utilized and helpful resource, followed by the *students recreation center*, the *Rack Food Pantry* and *WVU Legal Services*.

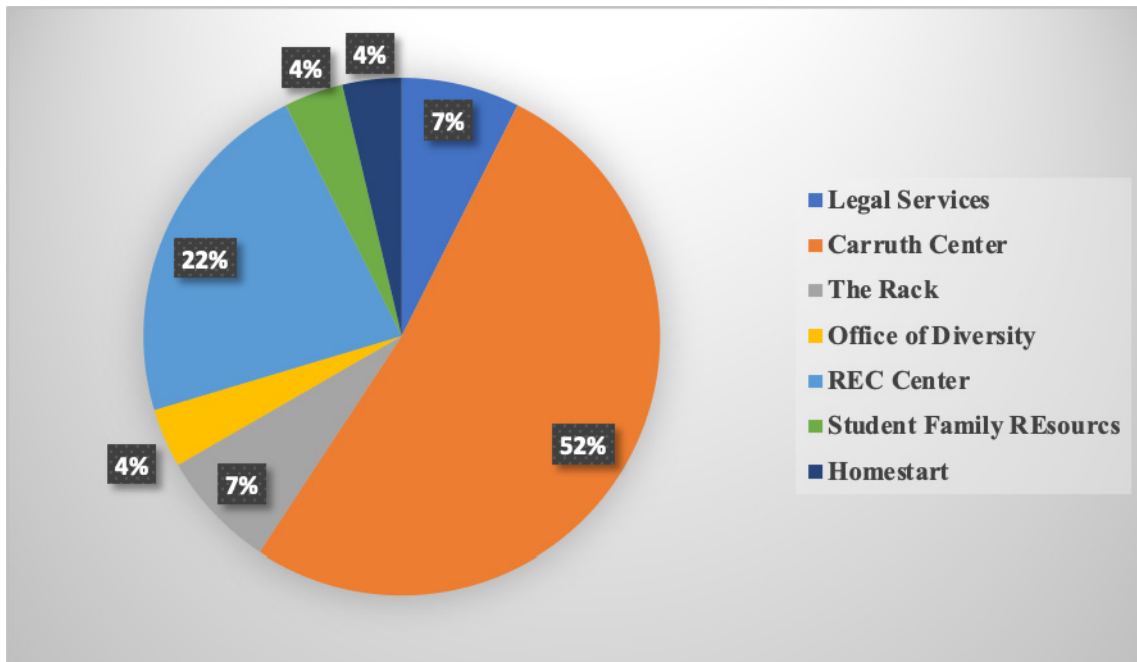


Figure 1. Resources Utilized by Students to Adjust

Source: Okai, 2020.

In response to question 5a in the survey, students identified several other resources outside WVU that they utilized to adjust. Students stated *family and friends* as the most utilized and helpful resource outside of WVU, followed by *church or religion*, and *student groups*. Students reported in the survey that family and friends helped them adjust by assisting them find accommodation, orienting them to their new environment, giving moral support, practical advice, and tips on navigating the system. Other resources students identified in response to question 9 from the survey was *sports and recreation* (swimming, going to the gym, extracurricular activities, etc.), *pets and social services* (pet animals, volunteering, music, books, video games, community activities, etc.), *family and friends* (other international students, phone calls and face time with family abroad, help from friends, etc.). The greatest resource students identified was *themselves* (their perseverance, dedication towards earning their degree, endurance, strong will, determination, dreams and aspirations, etc).

3. Results and Importance of This Study to Social Work

The mission of Social Work, declared in the code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) is to “to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (Preamble, NASW Code of Ethics). This mission of meeting basic human needs of *all people* includes international students as they make significant contributions to their campuses, communities, and nation at large. Despite their significant contributions, international students are a “*vulnerable people*” as they find

themselves in an entirely new environment different from what they're used to. Social work's primary goal is to provide support and assistance to such vulnerable populations (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2018). Results of this study bared racism, discrimination, relationship between faculty and students, English language problems, and treatment received at social functions as the key adjustment challenges experienced by international students. It is ironic that the WVU Office of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion was ranked the least helpful resource at WVU considering that the main purpose of that office is to provide support and advocacy for students, educate and address societal inequalities and oppression to create an all-inclusive and fostering campus community for students and all. Studies on international students adjustments throughout the U.S shows that international students continue to be confronted with several challenges (Al-Oraibi, et al, 2022; Dong et al, 2023; Hirai et al, 2015; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; & Koo et al, 2023) despite colleges' efforts in creating a conducive environment and addressing these challenges. There is a lack of professionals who understand international students peculiar challenges and advocates to champion the needs of international students. International students are left on their own to navigate through a system they're not familiar with, and adjust in a culture different from theirs. The urgent need for social workers to collaborate with institutions to support international students adjust to their new environment cannot be overemphasized.

3.1 Implications for Social Work Practice

Social Justice: This study exposed racism, difficult relationship between faculty and students, and discrimination that international students experienced. Discrimination has a negative and tremendous impact on the psychological well-being of students (Donovan, et al, 2012). "Social justice aims to provide fair and reasonable treatment to all people, particularly vulnerable groups that face either overt or covert discrimination and oppression" (Pomeroy & Garcia 2018, p.17). It is important as social workers to take necessary actions to help individuals adjust to life challenges and work to "create social conditions favorable to human well-being" (Miley, & O'melia, 2022. p.3). Social workers have a responsibility to *advocate* for responsive and inclusive policies for institutions to offer more support systems for international students, and *challenge* discrimination and unfair policies. Miley, & O'melia, 2022, asserts that discrimination, oppression and social exclusion are human rights violations and should be a concerning issue for all social workers.

Competence: The social work value of competence mandates social workers to increase their professional knowledge and skills, and apply them as they engage with clients to "plan potential solutions to problems, develop skills to resolve problems, and create support for change attempts." (Miley, O'melia, 2022, p.4) From this study, the challenge students perceived WVU as addressing the most was understanding lectures in English followed by ability to write in English, meanwhile, students greatest challenge was racism and discrimination. Social workers need to work with appropriate offices to identify students' unique challenges and strengths, engage them in developing inclusive programs that specifically addresses the needs and challenges of students.

Multidimensional Practice – Achieving the fundamental purpose of social work involves

integrating a multi-level approach in creating changes that positively impact the individual and society. Social workers responsibility extends beyond the individual client to combine and apply appropriate skills such as empathy, advocacy, mediating, lobbying, facilitating, etc., to assess, evaluate, engage, and intervene to bring about a positive change at multiple system levels (Miller & Archuleta, 2013), recognizing that human behavior is linked to social and physical environments. From this study, most students were not aware of existing resources, others were oblivious on accessing campus resources. Social workers need to connect students with needed resources, support them to network and engage with domestic students and faculty, initiate training and orientation for faculty, and promote societal structures and fair policies.

Empowerment – To empower individuals is to support them take charge over their lives, equipping them to make productive contributions in society that results in improvements in societal systems and policies which in turn impacts the individual positively (Breton, 2017; Dubois & Miley, 2019; Parsons & East, 2013). Collaborating with appropriate university offices to improve existing systems, engaging students in promoting social change and creating solutions is obligatory for social workers. It is crucial for social workers to work with students in ways that strengthen their sense of competence.

4. Recommendations and Conclusion

4.1 Micro Level

Effective facilitation: The face-to-face interviews conducted in this study divulged that some students became aware of existing resources almost at the end of their studies. Facilitation is important in supporting international students adjust in their new environment (Chen & Yang 2014). Social workers have a role as **brokers** to make students aware of existing resources on campus and connect them to existing resources. Despite the WVU Carruth Center being the highest ranked resource utilized according to the survey, students still reported lack of sufficient personal-social counselling. It is important for social workers role as **therapists** to provide counselling to students and support their emotional and mental well-being. As **enablers**, it is pivotal to support them to network and get involved in groups, clubs, and organizations on campus, be open minded and appreciate the different cultures.

As **trainers**, it is essential to work directly with domestic students, educate them to interact and socialize with international students to let them feel welcome, accepted, and create a sense of community which will reduce the feeling of loneliness and isolation experienced by international students. *Relationship between faculty and students*, and *challenges with professors and advisors* were among the key challenges reported by international students in the survey. A positive relationship between faculty, staff and international students is important in the successful adjustment of international students (Zhou, Frey and Bang , 2011). This is reiterated in the social work code of ethics value of *importance of human relationships* which states that “Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change.....Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities”

(NASW Code of Ethics). It is important as *social activists* to work directly with faculty to create positive relationships between them and international students to assist in their successful adjustment.

4.2 Mezzo Level

Effective Communication: Effectual and competent social workers integrate all levels of social work in their practice to produce positive changes to the multifaceted problems of individuals and society at large (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). English language difficulties were among the key challenges reported by students in the survey despite students perceived greatest assistance from WVU to be assistance with English Language. Lee et al. (2022) states that English language challenges experienced by international students causes both academic and non-academic stressors. Increase in mental health symptoms is alleged to be associated with English challenges (Wei et al., 2015). This study showed that students greatly utilized the writing studio provided by WVU, yet students had significant English Language challenges which could be due to inadequate support by the studio in assisting with speaking and understanding English which were the specific challenges students had with English language. As **Catalysts**, it is essential for social workers to work closely with offices on campuses to evaluate and improve existing resources like the writing centers, counselling centers, etc. to ensure services provided are tailored to the specific needs of students to better accommodate their needs.

As **Trainers**, social workers need to initiate training and continuous orientation for faculty and staff to better orient them on international students' learning and thinking styles, and increase their cultural awareness, sensitivity, and diversity. Formal mentorship with international faculty should be promoted in our roles as **administrators**. "Culturally sensitive mentoring for international students, in which the mentor has developed a better understanding of the unique cultural needs and strengths of their mentee, may help facilitate better relationships between mentors and international students" (Park-Saltzman et al., 2012 cited in Lee et al, 2022p. 3). Open dialogues should be encouraged, and work together with appropriate offices such as the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and International students Offices as **conveners** to host informal meetings, open dialogues, cultural events, and other social programs regularly where international students can connect with other students and staff to freely share their experiences.

4.3 Macro Level

Community Relationship. Macro practice is broad and focuses on large systematic issues, social and economic justice. It involves societal education, advocacy, community development, policy analysis, etc., and utilizes skills such as advocacy, lobbying, research, mediating, facilitating, etc. to assess, evaluate, engage, and intervene to bring about a positive change (Miller & Archuletta, 2013). International students challenges cannot be addressed effectively without the social worker intervening at the macro level. Taking action on behalf of others especially those unable to advocate for themselves is the **advocacy** role of the social worker (Pomeroy & Garcia, 2018). Social workers need to **advocate** for institutions, international student advisors, and appropriate offices, to offer more support services to

international students as they transition to their new environment. Rather than simply using TOEFL or IELTS, social workers should *advocate* for colleges and universities to develop multiple language assessment tools and support international students with opportunities for academic socialization, and supported social integration and engagement experiences (Hoekje and Stevens, 2018).

“Schools are not islands, they operate within a community” (Okai, 2020, p.144). A positive and welcoming community is important to ensure international students thrive in their new environment (Grayson, 2008). As *outreach* workers, social workers are mandated to support the creation of good relationships between institutions, their communities and beyond. Positive relationships between institutions and the community create a sense of belonging and security for international students. Promoting and supporting social support systems within the community as *Lobbyists* will help them overcome culture shock and consequently result in the improvement of their performance.

5. Limitations

Even though the sample size of 220 participants is appropriate for this study, a larger size between 350 to 400 participants would have been an ideal representation. Also, considering Lysgaard’s UCT which suggests that students go through different stages of adjustment at different times, a longitudinal study throughout the years that students spent at WVU would have been ideal. Time and resources were however limited. Finally, for the results of this study to be more generalized, this study could have extended the challenges of international students in other public and private institutions.

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