

## **Stress factors experienced by international students while attending a South Texas university**

Odunola F. Oyeniya  
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Steve F. Bain  
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

Karen L. Furgerson  
Texas A&M University-Kingsville

### Abstract

Human psychological stress involves a state of emotional strain resulting from a demanding circumstance. The objective of this study is to critically examine the factors causing the stress among the international students studying in South Texas University. In this study, 67 surveys were administered to international undergraduate and graduate students at South Texas University. According to the results, 97% of the international students are experiencing many of the types of stress found in the literature reviewed for this project. The results of the present study also indicated that environmental and cultural change also has a great impact on their emotional stability. The school faculty members have an important role to play in accommodating the international students and giving proper orientation on how to live a stress free academic life. Stress reduction will eventually have a positive impact on academic performance of international college students.

Key words: International students, stress, academics, cultural change

## Stress Factors Experienced by International Students While Attending a South Texas University

### Introduction

Stress has become an unavoidable psychological and emotional factors affecting academic performance of international college students in south Texas. Empirical evidence reviewed for this project suggested that international students coming to United States to study were emotionally disturbed in comparison with their American citizen counterparts (Ebbin & Blankenship, 1986, 1988). Living and studying in another part of the world can sometimes be a joyful experience. This change of environment involves many sociocultural, environmental, and physiological change as well as emotional adjustment. It is not unusual during the adaptation process for stress-related emotional instability, for example, helplessness, segregation, insignificance, and emotional imbalance to arise. Previous research reviewed indicated that psychological stress is a serious issue affecting the lives of international students (Aubrey, 1991; Dyal & Chan, 1985; Ebbin & Blankenship, 1986, 1988; Redmond & Bunyi, 1993; Leong, Ward & Low, 2000). One experiences stress when foreseeing danger, high risk and issues that is not capable of resolving. (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

In support of this, Lazarus (1993) characterized three types of stress as danger, high risk and issue. Lazarus (1993), referred to danger as emotional and mental harm already experienced by an individual. High risk is a danger that has not occurred but may be inevitable. One issue includes challenging demands that one feels certain of tackling by effective gathering and usage of resources. All these types of stress are combined as a serious concern for the international students coming to a south Texas University. This can directly or indirectly affect the well-being of their entire stay in the college if these stresses are not properly managed. Social connectedness and social backing may influence the international students' cultural adaptation challenge. Cultural adaptation stress can also accompany psychological instability, for example, feelings of segregation, insignificance, loneliness, and helplessness. (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1998). This study examined how stress can be an important component for personal and professional development and its negative effects when it became too much on social adaptation of international students' personal development and their academic achievement.

### Literature Review

Stress occurs when an individual is faced with an overwhelming situation in which one cannot cope. Most of the stresses among international students in an unfamiliar academic environment are family home problems, language barriers, poor academic relationship with the instructors, relationship with other students, loneliness, financial challenge, insufficient resources to perform academic work and culture shock (Leong, Ward & Low, 2000). International students experience different kinds of stressors during their education abroad. They also experience the educational system's peculiar demands (Cadieux & Wehrly, 1986), this may result in emotional instability. International students may encounter lack of concentration in their lectures due to the stress associated with their lives (Lieberman, 1994; Leong, Ward & Low, 2000). There are other factors causing culture shock other than English language proficiency; however, it is one of the major factors affecting international students' environmental acclimatization. As Liberman (1994) discovered there may be significant and organizational elements involved in classroom

teaching that may be unfamiliar to international students. Liberman (1994) suggested that international students might be familiar with the traditional mode of instructing through lecture and the traditional educational environment at an American university. But he also emphasized the fact that the classroom instruction may be a major challenge due to language barriers. This implies that international students see communication as a great challenge affecting them in the classroom and among other students in their new learning environment.

Culture shock has been investigated as another major factor affecting international students' psychological stability (Idowu, 1985; Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1991; Ward, 1996). They may also experience sociocultural difficulties outside the campus. Many international students observed that they are new and outsiders to the host culture and do not have the essential capacity to manage some fundamental life occasions around them (Ishimaya, 1989). The moment these culture-shock related occasions are evaluated as beyond an individual's capabilities (Furnham & Bockner, 1986; Lazarus, 1993) these might become stressors within international students' day to day adjustments to the peculiar socio-cultural setting. Olaniran (1993) found that developing new inter-personal relationships within the university and community can be an important factor for their social anxiety. As international students experience awkwardness with their new environment, they may be hesitant to fully participate in social circumstances and make new companions in the new environment. Likewise, international students are constantly seen to be more isolated and guarded than the local students (Parr, Bradley, & Bingi, 1991). A persistent condition of confinement and depression may strengthen the feeling of weakness experienced by the international students. This improves the possibility of students' being dejected. Two studies reviewed noted that social disconnection and emotions of isolation and dejection are identified with downheartedness and pressure experienced by international students (Ebbin & Blankenship, 1986).

According to Ross, Neibling, and Heckert (1999) and Lyrakos (2012), the increase in stress levels on the lives of international students has many explanations. Firstly, international students need to adjust significantly to the new learning environment. Second, because of the language challenge, there is a need to understand the new set of people. Third, accommodation arrangements and students' entire lifestyle change increase the stress encountered by the majority of international students. Furthermore, international students may struggle with emotional issues related to educational requirements and cultural adjustments that may be unprepared to face. It has been suggested that the stress among international students in the United States is caused by these factors.

To achieve stress reduction among international students, there is a need for university officials to examine and apply suitable techniques that will be used to carefully investigate the consequences of stress on international students' academic performance and their entire well-being. To maintain the standard of education among the international students in the United States, the university needs to provide necessary solutions that will improve the emotional and psychological stability among the international students (Wang, Slaney, & Rice, 2007).

Any breakdown or sudden aggravations on budgetary deficit can influence the international students' educational interest and additionally other aspects of living. This stress "can bring about displeasure, vulnerability, reverse racial and ethnic preference toward the mainstream cultural group, and different types of uncertain psychological and emotional issues" (Westwood & Ishimaya, 1991, p. 134). Also, the language barrier is one of the perceived major issues among international students (Mori, 2000). This non-fluency in English language skills might have a negative effect on academic performance among the international students and their

approach to their life in the United States. This will eventually influence their emotional adjustment to the new environment (Wang, Slaney, & Rice, 2007). A majority of international students find it difficult to clearly present their academic skills in English since a majority of them are not used to the many different dialects of United States before leaving their home countries (Pedersen, 1991). Additionally, culture shock also limits the opportunities of international students to socialize with their American counterparts (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Because of the shock associated with language, lower levels of English familiarity may prompt higher levels of acculturative anxiety among international students.

Loneliness also affects most international students because it is more likely to occur under circumstances such as prolonged absence from the home country and family members or inability to move around in the United States. Feelings of loneliness among international students are like feelings of depression, anger, and sorrow. They can be managed though it may not be totally prevented. A student with a strong feeling of togetherness can simply associate with other new individuals and become interested in social gatherings. International students who lack togetherness are liable to undergo low self-confidence, depression, and anxiety instead. (Perrott, 2003).

## Methods

In this study, the primary investigator surveyed international college students at a south Texas university with permission of the faculty. Also, the Institutional Review Board gave consent to collect the data at the above university. The researcher created a survey instrument with the following questions:

- Gender (Please select one).
- Please check your ethnicity:
- Classification:
- How many years have you been in the United States?
- Did you have stress when you came to college the first semester?
- I work this many hours per week.
- Please check the stress factors from the list that is affecting your academic performance in a south Texas university. (Select from the list).
- I have not become used to enjoying semester holidays in United States of America.
- I find it easy to move from my accommodations to the lecture-room.
- Homesickness bothers me.
- I can feel racial discrimination toward me from other students on campus.
- I found it difficult to understand all the instructors in class.
- I am cautious because I look different from most Americans.
- I feel uncomfortable adjusting to new foods in America.
- I am having a lot of trouble getting college accommodation.
- I have not been performing effectively during examinations due to some stress.
- I had no challenge with my room mate
- People treat me badly just because I am an international student.
- I participate in extra-curricular events to reduce the stress.
- It is so hard for me to get a job in the university.
- Off-campus accommodation is more convenient.

- As a foreigner, I worry having my future career in America.

Approximately 66 surveys were administered in undergraduate and graduate classes at a south Texas university as part of the research study. The principal investigator asked permission from the instructors at the departments before she administered the surveys. The participants returned the surveys to the principal investigator when they finished taking the survey.

## Results

Results from the survey indicated that 100% of the participants certified that they are 18 years of age or older. Also, 100% of the participants voluntarily agreed to participate in this research study. Moreover, 89.4% of the participants rated themselves as males and 10.6% rated themselves as females. In terms of the ethnicity, the participants that responded are as follows: African, 12.1%; Asian, 86.4% and other, 1%. When asked about the classification, the results showed that 3.0% indicated themselves as undergraduates, 97.0% as Grad/Masters. When asked how many years the participants have been in the United States, the results said that the respondents in the survey showed that, 62.1% were residents for less than 1 year and 37.9% residents for 1 to 5 years. The participants were asked if they experienced stress when they came to the college the first semester, the responses to the survey indicated the following answers: “Extremely”= 24.2%; “Kind of”= 21.2%; “A little”= 36.4% and “Not at all”= 18.2%. Further, when the participants were asked how many hours they work per week, the response showed that 83.3% of the participants do not work, 15.2% work part-time (05-20 hours per week), and 1.5% work full time (20-40 hours per week). When asked to check the stress factors from the list that they perceived impact their academic performance (financial challenge, culture shock, loneliness, transportation, accommodations, language barrier, academic support, and other), participants’ responses indicated that all these factors are affecting their academic performance in some way. When the participants were asked which of the stress factors affected their academic performance, the results were ranked as follows: transportation (74.2%); financial challenges (65.2%); loneliness (50%); accommodations (50%); culture shock (50%) and the language barrier (50%); academic support (30.3%); other (7.6).

In terms of whether the participants have become used to enjoying semester holidays in the United States of America, 21.2% stated “all the time”, 34.8% said “often”, 22.7% said “rarely” and 21.2% stated “never”. Also when asked if the participants find it easy to move from their accommodations to the lecture room, the results said that 36.4% stated “all the time”, 37.9% said “often”, 24.2% said “rarely”, and 1.5% stated “never”. When the participants were asked whether homesickness bothers them, 28.8% stated “all the time”, 28.8% stated “often”, 25.8% stated “rarely”, and 16.7% stated “never”. In addition, the participants were asked if they feel racial discrimination towards them from other students on campus, result indicated that 6.1% “often” felt discrimination, 37.9% “rarely” felt discrimination, and 56.1% “never” felt discrimination from other students on campus. When surveyed about difficulty in understanding all the instructors in class, 7.6% stated they had difficulty “all the time”, 34.8% said they “often” had difficulty, 30.3% “rarely” had difficulty and 27.3% stated that they “never” had difficulty. Also, when the participants were asked if they are cautious because they look different from most Americans, the results said that 12.1% stated “all the time”, 31.8% stated “often”, 21.2% stated “rarely”, and 34.8% stated “never”.

Furthermore, the participants were asked if they feel uncomfortable adjusting to new foods in America, the results indicated that 13.6% of the respondents stated “all the time”, 37.9% said

“often”, 25.8% said “rarely”, and 22.7% stated “never”. Also, when asked if the participants are having a lot of trouble getting accommodations in the area, 9.1 % of the participants stated “all the time”, 28.8% stated “often”, 18.2% stated “rarely”, and 43.9% stated “never”. When asked whether the participants have not been performing effectively during examinations due to some stress, 33.3% stated “often”, 39.4% said “rarely”, and 27.3% stated “never”. Additionally, the participants were asked if they had no challenge with their roommate, 13.6 % stated “all the time”, 28.8% said “often”, 12.1% said “rarely”, and 45.5% stated “never”. When asked whether people treat them badly just because they are international students, the results indicated that 1.5% found this to be true “all the time”, 10.6% “often” found this to be true, 33.3% “rarely” experienced bad treatment , and 54.5% stated that they “never” experienced bad treatment.

When the participants were asked if they participate in extra-curricular events to reduce stress, 15.2% of the participants stated “all the time”, 42.4% said “often”, 31.8% said “rarely”, and 10.6% stated “never”. When asked whether it is so hard for the participants to get a job in the university, the results indicated that, 60.6% stated that it was “extremely” hard, 30.3% said it was “kind of” hard, 6.1% found it to be “a little” hard and 3.0% stated “not at all”. Also, when the participants were asked if off-campus accommodations are more convenient, the results showed that, 30.3% stated “all the time”, 60.6% said “often”, 4.5% said “rarely” and 4.5% stated “never”. Finally, the participants were asked, if as a foreigner, they worry having their future career in America, the results said that 16.7% stated “all the time, 56.1% stated “often”, 15.2% stated “rarely” and 1.1% stated “never”.

### **Conclusion**

The present results did show International students experience stress in their day to day activities while attending a south Texas university. Psychological adjustment in the United States is a critical issue for international students as they find it difficult to adapt to the new learning environment. These results provide an opportunity to understand more about the stress affecting the international students and having a negative impact on fulfilling their future aims of having a world class education.

Though this survey provided evidence that while international students do deal with significant stressors in a south Texas university such as (financial challenges, culture shock, loneliness, on-campus employment, transportation, accommodations, language barrier, academic support and other), there could be a way of helping them to overcome these stressors, especially when they are still new to the system, so as reduce the stress associated with the adjustment. Moreover, these results as well as further research in this area could be useful to help international students see their coming to the United States as a great privilege and opportunity to achieve quality education that will expose them to the real world experience and the opportunities to interact with people of different culture.

## References

- Aubrey, R. (1991). International students on campus: A challenge for counselors, medical providers, and clinicians. *Smith College Studies in Social Work* 62(1): 20–33
- Cadieux, R. A., & Wehrly, B. (1986). Advising and counseling the international student. *New Directions for Student Services*, 36, 51-63. Retrieved February 2, 2015. from <http://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ss.37119863607/abstract>
- Dyal, J. A. & Chan, C. (1985). Stress and distress: A study of Hong Kong Chinese and Euro Canadian students. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 16: 447–466
- Ebbin, A.J., & Blankenship, E.S. (1986). A longitudinal health study: International versus domestic students. *Journal of American College Health*, 34: 177-82
- Ebbin, A.J., & Blankenship, E.S. (1988). Stress-related diagnosis and barriers to health care among foreign students: results of a survey. *Journal of American College Health*, 36: 311-312.
- Furnham, A., & Bockner, S. (1986). *Culture-shock: Psychological reactions to unfamiliar environments*. New York: Methuen
- Hayes, R. L., & Lin, H. R. (1994). Coming to America: Developing social support systems for international students. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 22, 7-16. Retrieved February 12, 2015, from <http://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.2161.1912.1994.tb00238.x/abstract>
- Idowu, A. I. (1985). Counseling Nigerian students in United States colleges and universities. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 63, 187-193. Retrieved February 9, 2015. From <http://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1556-6676.1985.tb02746.x/abstract>
- Ishimaya, F. I. (1989). Understanding foreign adolescents' difficulties in cross-cultural adjustment: A self-validation model. *Canadian Journal of School Psychology*, 5, 41-56.
- Lazarus, R. S. (1993). Psychological stress to the emotions: A history of changing outlooks. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 44, 1-2. Retrieved February 10, 2015, from <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.ps.44.020193.000245>
- Lazarus, R. S., & Folkman, S. (1984). *Stress, Appraisal and Coping*. New York: Springer
- Leong, C., Ward, C. & Low M. (2000). Revising the “Cultural Fit” proposition: Personality and adjustment in two cultures. Paper presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> International Congress of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology, Pultusk, Poland
- Lieberman, K. (1994). Asian student perspectives on America university instruction. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 18, 173-192. Retrieved February 16, 2015, from <http://www.sciencedirect.com/sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/0147176794900272>
- Lyrakos, D. (2012). The impact of stress, social support, self efficacy and coping on university students, a multicultural European study. *Psychology*, 3, 143-149.
- Mori, S. C. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 78, 137-144. Retrieved February 2, 2015, from <http://www.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/j.1556-6676.2000.tb02571.x/abstract>
- Olaniran, B. A. (1993). International students' network patterns and cultural stress: What really counts. *Communication Research Reports*, 10, 69-83. Retrieved January 25, 2015, from <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/08824099309359919>
- Paar, G., Bradley, L., & Bingi, R. (1991). Directors' perceptions of the concerns and feelings of international students. *College Student Journal*, 25, 370-376. Retrieved February 18, 2015. from <http://www.psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/1992-10895-001>

- Pedersen, P. (1991). Counseling international students. *Journal of Counseling Psychologist*, 19, 10-58. Retrieved February 7, 2015, from <http://www.tcp.sagepub.com/content/19/1/10.short>
- Perrott, A. (2003, April 28). Overseas students face a culture gap. *New Zealand Herald*. Available from [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1&objectid=3451492](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=3451492)
- Redmond, M. & Bunyi, J. (1993). The relationship of intercultural communicative competence with stress and the handling of stress as reported by international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 17: 235–254.
- Ross, S. E. B., Niebling, C., & Heckert, T. M. (1999). Sources of stress among college students. *College Students*, 33, 312-318.
- Sandhu, D. S., & Asrabadi, B. R. (1998). An acculturative stress scale for international students: A practical approach to stress management. *Evaluating Stress: A Book of Resources*, 2, 1-33. Retrieved February 5, 2015, from [http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=related.foxTMBeqRWkj:scholar.google.com/&hl=en&as\\_sdt=0,44](http://scholar.google.com/scholar?q=related.foxTMBeqRWkj:scholar.google.com/&hl=en&as_sdt=0,44)
- Ward, Colleen. 1996. "Acculturation." In *Handbook of Intercultural Training*, 2nd Edition, eds. Dan Landis and Rabi S. Bhadat. pp. 124–147. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Wang, K., Slaney, R., & Rice, K. (2007). Perfectionism in Chinese university students from Taiwan: A study of psychological well-being and achievement motivation. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 42, 1279–129
- Westwood, M. & Ishimaya, I. (1991). Challenges in counseling immigrant clients: Understanding intercultural barriers to career adjustment. *Journal of Employment Counseling*, 28(4): 130-143