Rising to the challenge: Experiences of International Students Studying at the University of Cape Coast

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Abstract: **Using the hierarchical constraints theory, this study explores the challenges of international students studying at the University of Cape Coast (UCC). The data was collected and analyzed using the qualitative research method. A semi-structured interview was conducted with a purposive sample of twenty-four (24) international students. The majority of the student respondents indicated that they had challenges which were related to academic, accommodation, psychosocial, cultural and financial issues. It is recommended that there should be long term and short-term strategies to minimize all challenges that international students face.**

Keywords: **challenges, international, local, students, studying abroad**

I. INTRODUCTION

Studying in overseas universities or college presents international students with exciting opportunities. However, with these opportunities come challenges that need to be overcome. According to Bista and Gaulee (2017), international students encounter a range of challenges in their first study period in a new country; they are expected to make transitions to new educational, cultural and social environments. Due to the increasing number of international students and their benefits concerning host institutions and host countries, considerable efforts and devotion to attract them has also emerged. The University of Cape Coast (UCC) is no exception to this quest for international students. Conscious efforts by the Centre for International Education (CIE) and the Directorate of Academic Affairs (DAA) are made annually to enrol international students. The reasons for the pursuit of international students are not far-fetched as they contribute to the diversity and internationalization of the classrooms, campus and the general community.

However, it seems less attention is paid to the challenges of international students in their journey as they study at UCC. Using the hierarchical constraints theory by Crawford, Jackson and Godbey (1991), this study takes a more comprehensive approach to look at some prevailing challenges that international students of UCC have to face as postgraduate, undergraduate or exchange students. Crawford et al.'s (1991) tripartite hierarchical constraints typology remains the most referred to by studies analyzing participation challenges. According to this model, there are three main categories of constraints, namely, intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural. Intrapersonal constraints are the individual-level (haracteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and personality traits) inhibitors; interpersonal are the inhibitors that result from individuals' relationships with others such as family members, friends and relatives, and structural constraints are the institutional, organizational, community and policy environments level inhibitors (Crawford et al., 1991). The following research questions guided in investigating the challenges faced by international students in UCC:

1. What are the prevailing challenges facing international students as they study?
2. How can the challenges be resolved?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

International education has a long history dating back to the Grand Tour of the 17th and 18th Centuries. In those days, scholars and students travelled to the intellectually dominant countries to seek knowledge (Lee & Rice, 2007). This tradition has continued to this day. Nonetheless, the emphasis on international education is now shifting towards internationalization and globalization. International students are being considered as clients by many higher institutions of learning but quite surprisingly, little attention has been given to their experiences after enrolment, which has been causing much of these international students' dissatisfaction in most universities (Constantine et al., 2004). Many scholars have paid attention to the international education phenomenon and the challenges that international students face (Andrade, 2006; Kitsantas, 2004). Some international students feel isolated even with the core activities of a university which are teaching and learning. Researchers have also noted a catalogue of adjustment problems facing international students as a whole, including educational challenges, communication problems, financial difficulties, accommodation, social isolation, serious nostalgia problems, worries about immediate and extended family, discrimination, and the adjustment to social customs and cultural differences (Andrade, 2006).

A survey by Andrade (2006) showed that international students faced a wide range of issues such as accommodation problems, language difficulties, discrimination, financial issues, and cultural misunderstanding. He suggested that as the number of international students rapidly increases, it is important to analyze and get a better understanding of adjustment issues that confront international students.

Paltridge et al. (2012) confirmed that there is a need to improve methods and strategies for supporting international students, socially, economically, academically, and psychologically. According to Tseng and Newton (2002), despite the advantages of international education, international students encounter a wide range of issues when they live and study abroad. Those issues are generally related to language difficulties, adaptation to a new learning system, psychological problems such as homesickness, discrimination, and feeling isolated, as well as socio-cultural problems with health care and financial systems.

Other issues as summarized by Khoo et al. (2002) include financial difficulties, depression, and culture shock. Zahi (2002) also found that the most important issues that international students encounter are those associated with language difficulties, the academic system, and cultural differences. Burdett and Crossman (2012) argue that although there are many issues and obstacles that international students share with their domestic peers, there are also numerous challenges that are unique to the international student experience. Examples of these challenges may include, unfamiliar campuses and the novelty of a new country which can be devastating and give the student a sense of alienation.

According to Bista and Gaulee (2017), while many challenges of international students have remained the same for the last several decades, new and complex changes are evolving along with the rapid economic growth and technological changes. Mori (2000) argues that international students' challenges are mainly academic and social and are influenced by language competence, cultural differences and preconceived expectations of student life on campuses.

Even though there are extensive researches on international students' adaptation while studying in a foreign environment (Leong & Chou, 1996; Pedersen, 1991), it has been observed that professionals do not have a clear understanding of cross-cultural differences. This creates a communication gap between the institution and the international student (Bista & Gaulee, 2017). Maringe and Carter's (2017) review on international students revealed that international students, like the local students, face several challenges associated with starting a new phase in their lives. Such challenges include the search for accommodation, dealing with financial pressures, seeking employment, familiarizing with the new environment, dealing with physical and mental health issues and adjusting to their study requirements. However, unlike local students, international students lack the social networks and support systems that most local students enjoy. In addition, international students are faced with a new environment and cultural context very different to the one they are used to and sometimes interacting in a language other than their own.

Wang (2004) also investigated the financial and emotional aspects of international students' experience in pursuing graduate education in the United States. This study revealed that pursuing studies overseas was an immense undertaking in terms of the financial investment and emotional conflicts arising from academic pressures and the transition between cultures. Some of the most discussed may be classified as intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural constraints as identified by Crawford and Godbey (1987) in their hierarchical constraints model. Intrapersonal constraints involve psychological conditions that are internal to the individual such as personality factors, attitudes, or more temporary psychological conditions such as mood. They arise out of interaction with others such as roommates, friends, coworkers and neighbors. Structural constraints include such factors as the lack of opportunities, teaching and learning environment or the cost of activities that result from external conditions in the environment.

III. METHODOLOGY

The qualitative case study method was applied since the aim of this study was to understand some of the challenges that international students face in UCC. A case study is the most appropriate qualitative research method for the study of the subject as it focuses on the practical knowledge of real-life situations. Purposive sampling was employed taking into consideration the availability and willingness of the students (Gracelter & Forzano, 2015). Semi-structured interviews were used for the data collection due to their suitability for studying a heterogeneous population (Holla-way & Wheeler, 2013). The heterogeneous sample comprised males and females from different countries of origin.

Twenty- four (24) international students participated in this study. These students were made up of proficiency, exchange, undergraduate and graduate students. Using purposive sampling, students were chosen to represent their home countries. This was to ensure an even representation. Based on the number of students enrolled in the various programmes, a quota system was used to select the students. Burkina Faso = 3, Ivory Coast = 4, Kenya = 2, Nigeria = 5, Senegal = 2, Togo= 2, Europe =4, America= 2. The participants were categorized into three folds: African Francophone International students (AFIS), African Anglophone International students (AAIS) and Non- African International Student (NAIS) across a broad range of ages with different fields and from different countries to ensure maximum variation.

NVIVO was used for the data coding and textual analysis. The authors and research assistants independently transcribed and coded the transcripts. We combined deductive and inductive coding techniques to allow for speed while opening up for "new/novel" discoveries. Subsequently, we jointly verified and resolved inconsistencies in codes and themes to enhance the findings' validity. The objectives of the study informed the analyses. The analysis followed the Framework Approach (familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting and mapping and interpretation) to qualitative data analysis proposed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994). At the first stage, each of us repeatedly read the transcripts to familiarize ourselves with the data. The second stage involved the development of analytic frameworks by identifying recurrent

issues and themes. The next phase refined (indexing) themes and summarized them into concise and coherent forms. In the final stage, we compared themes and subthemes with transcripts, field notes and tape recordings where needed. These processes ensured that adequate consistency was achieved. Thick descriptions, debriefing, member checking and peer reviews were used to enhance the rigor, trustworthiness and credibility of the narratives. Themes that arose from the analysis included academic, psychosocial, cultural, financial and accommodation challenges. To facilitate the interpretation of the results and ensure anonymousity, dummy names were employed.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research question examined the challenges facing international students who are studying at UCC and how these challenges can be resolved. The findings of this study indicated that interpersonal, intrapersonal, and structural constraints, the three types of leisure constraints as proposed by Crawford et al. (1991), exist among international students studying at UCC.

These three types of constraints are embedded in five overlapping kinds of problems just like other researchers have discovered as discussed in the review of the literature. These include academic, psychosocial, cultural, accommodation and financial challenges. Nearly all the participants answered positively that they face challenges in their studies in UCC. The problems as identified by the students are discussed under the following sub-themes:

4.1 Academic Challenges

Academic challenges refer to all activities that inhibit the students' performances. The students' academic challenges bordered on timely publicity of teaching timetables, lecturers' attendance to class and the grading system of the University. This situation sometimes frustrated them and affected their psychological health. A student revealed that, it took up to three weeks before they had their timetable. Almost all (96%) of the proficiency students experienced such challenges with some of their lecturers. They asserted that, although some lecturers were committed and punctual to class, others assigned their teaching duties to the teaching assistants. "After the timetable, some lecturers were not attending classes. They will send their Teaching Assistants to come to class" lamented a student.

Further, it was noted that the proficiency students had higher expectations of their lecturers to guide them to be able to read, write and communicate effectively in the English Language in a bid to enrol in some of the University's undergraduate programmes. However, their expectations were not fulfilled. According to one of the students, they "feel cheated because some other people are taking proficiency courses. We notice that the lecturers are more committed to them than us" (AFIS1). Their disappointments in such instances could be a

source of the psychological trauma they face during their stay on UCC campus.

On the other hand, the English-speaking African students complained about some of their lecturers who were occasionally incorporating Ghanaian language phrases in their delivery in class. A student noted that:

> *I can't understand many words in listening, particularly because of the speech rate and pronunciation. Certain words are familiar, others until the lecturer write it on the board, I'm at a loss. Sometimes, a lecturer uses jargon in the local language, everyone laughs except me. I become embarrassed with such an occurrence. I become more embarrassed when my mates and lecturers use the term, 'you are a Nigerian'. I know they mean no harm but sometimes I feel insulted.* (AAIS1)

Such emotional feelings on an international student may lead to a psychological challenge because the person may feel 'alone' and 'isolated'.

The Non-Africans, however, spoke with fondness of their lecturers. Some expressed their satisfaction with tutorship provided by their respective lecturers during classes. A Francophone student opined that:

> *Our lecturers have been fantastic. I enjoy their classes. They are easy to talk to, I enjoy their hospitality and their sense of humour. I wonder if they treat me so because I am an international student. Nonetheless, I enjoy attending their classes and I savour every bit of it.* (NAIS)

Another challenge highlighted concerned conflict in grading system (the required Grade Point Average scores for a pass). The grading system of tertiary institutions is not uniformed; thus, each tertiary institution has its own grading structure. The students stated that the grading system and the scoring of grades differed from that of their respective home countries and about 82% of them lamented that the grading system at UCC was very high. Noting this, a Francophone student noted that:

> *The grading system is different from my home country. The written assignments are also graded differently. Sometimes I put in my best, but I end up scoring a low mark. I try to be original in my presentations but most often my efforts go unnoticed.* (AFIS2)

Myburgh et al. (2006) argued that academic concerns such as what these international students face, if not well handled effectively, could create communication barriers that may result in misunderstandings or misinterpretations. These challenges, in effect, constitute learning constraints and difficulties in interpersonal communications and relationships with locals of the host country. Bamford (2006) submits that teachers must continue to work on understanding cultural differences in teaching and learning experiences for overseas students since this represents an important part of improving

progress and experience. The complaints by the non-English-speaking students' on English proficiency is corroborated with Khawaja and Stallman's (2011) study on international students who participated in an Australian research project. The respondents (students) reported that English proficiency posed a significant challenge to them. The findings showed that poor English language proficiency results in poor academic performance, stress, depression, and poor social interactions with host communities.

To avoid stress-related problems, Bamford (2006) recommends that teachers should be aware that the international dimension of the classroom can provide an added benefit since overseas students can broaden their colleagues' learning experiences while improving their self-esteem by sharing encounters of life and education in different contexts.

4.2 Psychosocial Challenges

Psychosocial challenges refer to the difficulties faced by students in different areas of their psychological and social functioning. The results showed that international students face challenges not only in the classroom but also in their social lives that affect them psychologically. During the interviews, some respondents reported that they have difficulties in communicating with the natives and some of their colleagues. Others also revealed that they feel alienated when working in groups with the local students. This is because the local students, occasionally, communicate in the local dialect without recourse to their presence. In such instances, the international students would have to draw their colleagues' attention to their presence.

Participants also noted that because of the differences in communication patterns, they experience some awkwardness during social interactions. They, however, felt more comfortable with people from their countries. This accounts for the reason why proficiency students are seen to be interacting with each other rather than their local colleagues. This has been revealed in the excerpt below:

> Initially, it was difficult for me. I felt homesick. I wanted to go home immediately. Fortunately, I met one sister from my home country. I would visit her whenever I felt homesick. Later in the semester, I made more friends, although the loneliness did not go away, I felt much better. (AFIS3)

As indicated the excerpt (AFIS3) above, the participant highlighted experiences of social isolation and loneliness. This was, especially difficult for students in the first years. The excerpt also alluded to difficulties of establishing friendly relations with local students in the early stages. However, participants agreed that, after the first year, they had grabbed some local languages and made friends with their local counterparts. Bamford (2006) suggests that institutions need to take responsibility to ensure the integration of overseas

students, and should consider the social context of students' adjustment to address their feeling of isolation.

4.3 Cultural challenges

Cultural challenges refer to the inability of international students to integrate well into their new environment. The participants hailed from cultures which differed from the Ghanaian culture. According to Msengi (2007), when international students try to integrate into a university, they have to navigate several unfamiliar systems. That is, they must learn how to communicate and build relationships in a way that reflects their new circumstances. The difficulty of doing this often leads to feelings of isolation from family, alienation from peers, stress or anxiety, and even depression (Khoo et al., 2002). It is, therefore, important for host institutions to provide these students with appropriate facilities to enable them to navigate through their problems. The following excerpts from the participants justify this point:

> I made an appointment with my academic advisor. Nevertheless, when I arrived, he was not in the office. I called him only to be told he had travelled I was disappointed. (NAIS2)

> During the second semester of my stay on campus, a mate invited me to lunch at her hostel. She insisted I eat with my hands. I felt it was a bit intimidating. (NAIS3)

> I am comfortable using my left hand. In answering questions, I raise my left hand. The first day I did, someone politely told me to use my right hand. Although I was told during the orientation to use my right hand as much as possible. I kept forgetting. Whenever I use my left hand, I feel as if everyone seems to see me as weird which makes me uncomfortable. (NAIS4)

> One time, I called a lecturer by his first name, he asked that I call him by his title. I'm at a loss as to who is a professor or a Doctor. (AFIS4)

The clash of cultures expressed in the excerpts conform to findings from studies such as Boafo-Arthur (2014), Msengi (2007) and Poyrazli and Grahame (2007). This showed that due to differences and clash of cultures, most international students had challenges with some aspects of Ghanaian culture and adaptation. As a result, it could lead to marginalization by peers and lecturers making it difficult to establish networks and thus, reinforcing their sense of isolation. Gareis' (2000) study on intercultural friendship with five German students in the USA found that feelings of isolation and lack of friendship with host nationals stemmed from differences in culture, specific differences in the meaning and nature of friendship. Constantine et al. (2005) agree that conflicts in cultural values between the home and host countries made academic and personal adjustment in college settings difficult. These findings are consistent with the findings of other research exploring the challenges of international scholars (Constantine et al., 2005; Msengi, 2007; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007) and this current finding because

students stated that despite the cultural challenges, they preferred studying at UCC because of issues of strike actions by teachers in their home country; exposure to other cultures was another reason given by the students as to why they prefer to study abroad.

4.4 Accommodation issues that impact international students in UCC

The high cost of housing is also a major concern, with housing and financial difficulties being interconnected. This is to be expected since housing is quite a likely one of the biggest expenses for international students, and concerns of this nature are exacerbated if students are not housed by the university (Bartram, 2013). This is increasingly the case, given the high demand and short supply of university housing. In UCC, international students pay about eight hundred dollars ($800) for campus accommodation. Once students are admitted into the University, accommodation is assured. During the second year, international students can maintain their halls of residence, however, documents from CIE revealed that about 99% of continuing international students prefer to stay outside the university campus. The common reason cited by students is the cost of university-based accommodation. In this vein, after the first year, they try to organize their living arrangements which also comes with other challenges such as inappropriate locations, sub-standard accommodation, uncompromising landlords and insecurity. This was revealed in the following excerpts:

> *The accommodation and other things related to our travel were arranged by the international office in my home country. I did not have the opportunity to choose my accommodation. The place is not bad but it is expensive.* (AFIS5).

> *In my first year I stayed on campus but I moved out in the second year because I rented a place outside the campus at a cheaper price.* (AAIS2)

> *When I got admission to study at UCC, I had difficulty with accommodation. The Centre that was supposed to get me accommodation was not aware of my admission. Within a month I had moved to three different accommodations. It was very depressing.* (AAIS3).

Niven (1987) asserts that the availability of campus housing and the large increase in the cost of campus accommodation has an impact on international students. He notes that suitable accommodation can be a paradise for them. On the other hand, unsuitable accommodation can add extra stress and worry for international students. Myburgh, Niehaus and Poggenpoel (2006) point out that it is important for international students to feel a sense of being 'at home' during their stay on campus because living away from their supportive families can lead to emotional distractions. Living in suitable accommodation, on the other hand, helps the students to counteract feelings of insecurity and loneliness (Myburgh, Niehaus & Poggenpoel, 2006; Thomsen, 2007).

Further more, living in suitable accommodation is crucial to the well-being and academic performance of international students (Wild & Overton, 2003).

4.5 Financial challenges

Almost all the African respondents mentioned the challenge of funding their tuition. Tuition for international students is higher than that of both undergraduate and postgraduate local students. International undergraduate students pursuing courses in the humanities in UCC pay three thousand, four hundred and fifty-four dollars ($3,454.00) whilst their counterparts in the sciences also pay a minimum of four thousand two hundred and one dollars ($4,201). Records from the Directorate of Finance indicated that international students struggle to pay their schools fees. The records showed that about 28% of the students are able to pay their school fees in full at the beginning of each semester. Also, about 50% of the students complete the payment of their fees at the end of the second semester. The remaining students carry arrears of the payment into the next level. This finding is in support of an earlier research by Constantine et al. (2005), Lee and Rice (2007), Marcketti et al. (2006) and Myburgh et al. (2006). Findings from the researchers showed that international students face financial constraints concerning basic living expenses as well as with the payment of their tuition.

This finding also echoes the findings of Blake (2006) and also those of Maringe and Carter (2007), who found that all the African students in their study had financial worries and 91% were concerned about how they would meet the costs of their study. According to Maringe and Carter (2007), the following comments as postulated by students are typical of the difficulties that students face when they study outside their home countries.

> *The payment of fees in foreign currency, adding to the instability of the economy and inflation has made the cost of living in Ghana very expensive.* (AAIS4)

> *Accommodation on campus is very expensive. It is not easy getting accommodation around campus either. The few decent ones around the campus are equally expensive.* (AFIS6).

> *I am a medical student; I pay about twelve thousand dollars a year as tuition fee. Apart from that, I pay eight hundred dollars for accommodation. Feeding is equally expensive. I sometimes wonder how my parents are going to raise all these monies.* (AAIS5).

> *I wish I could go home because of COVID- 19. No one knows when it will end but when I get home, I will not get money to come back.* (AFIS7)

According to Boafo-Arthur (2014), the financial problems of international students are often interrelated with other issues such as social isolation. For example, lack of funds can prevent students from participating in social activities with other students. Other students may also forfeit their holidays

due to financial constraints. This assertion confirms the current study as some students complained they would have wanted to travel back home during the pandemic but were compelled to stay because of financial constraints. Boafo-Arthur (2014) again asserts that, due to the financial recession plundering vast numbers of African countries, many African international self-sponsored students do not have the financial stability to pay for tuition, housing, food, thereby posing a major challenge to their academic and social lives. According to the interviews, although the international students felt welcomed to UCC when they were asked if they would return home due to the challenges facing them, almost all the students gave a negative response. However, the participants indicated that there should be an increased focus on minimizing all the challenges they face with long and short-term strategies.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

The findings of this research have provided an insight into some of the challenges faced by international students. Based on the findings and discussions, it can be concluded that there are some challenges experienced by international students while pursuing their education at UCC. Among the main challenges are academic, psychosocial, cultural, accommodation and financial challenges. The literature has indicated that the complexities of the challenges of international students around the world fall across many domains that are more similar to the systems approach to overall perceived student experiences.

Thus, this review brings the issues together in one place for future researchers willing to take on more specific issues in various contexts. Accordingly, a major implication from this review is that the challenges, categorized under the various themes, would provide information to policymakers, educational administrators, faculty and others working in higher education in host countries of some of the challenges of international students. The findings of this study have the potential to inform both researchers and practitioners as institutions attempt to create sufficient international student support services.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the interviews, almost all the students gave a negative response when they were asked if they would return home due to the challenges facing them, although they felt welcomed to UCC. However, the students (respondents) indicated that there should be an increased focus on minimizing these challenges with long and short-term strategies. The students proposed recommendations and suggestions that will help curb these challenges. Among them are:

1. introduction of extracurricular activities.
2. organization of multicultural activities to entertain the students.
3. improvement in lecturers' methodology.
4. the number of students and room sizes should be considered to avoid overcrowding.
5. the host university's orientation programme should focus on both the physical and psychological aspects of the students.
6. lecturers should be alert and sensitive to the needs of international students taking into consideration cultural differences.
7. the need to introduce an international student advisory service board in the university.

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