

It's Harder Than You Think: International Graduate Students' Academic Adjustment Struggles in the Agricultural Education Programs in the U.S.

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Introduction

International students are important assets to the U.S. education system by enriching the campuses' cultural diversity (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015), enhancing the quality of higher education (Lapina, Roga, & Mürsepp, 2016), and contributing with approximately \$43 billion each year since 2017 to the U.S. economy (Institute of International Education, 2021). However, these students, who have to adjust to a new academic, social, and cultural context, face microaggressions against their "language proficiency, foreign accent, race, ethnicity, and gender" by the host population (Ee, 2013, p. 72).

The "minoritized populations in agricultural education are marginalized and othered" (Cropps & Esters, p. 138). The international status is further neglected within the marginalized population, although international students constitute most minority students in agricultural education programs (Masambuka-Kanchewa, Qu, & Cline, 2021). Research regarding international students in agricultural education is close to non-existent. This study attempts to bridge the gap by exploring international students' adjustment issues in U.S. agricultural education programs.

Conceptual Framework

Vasilopoulos (2016) conducted a thorough review of international student experience research and proposed the Deleuzian ontology of "becoming" and "assemblage" as an improved framework for this line of inquiry. The framework of "becoming" rejects the pre-given static identities and emphasizes the human nature of continuously changing and adapting to new contexts (Martin & Kamberelis, 2013). "Becoming occurs in assemblage," combining all individual and environmental elements to "enter into relation, interacting to make, unmake, and remake one another" (Vasilopoulos 2016, p. 294). International students are an assemblage of multiple factors, including "linguistic and academic background, personality, past, and present experiences and circumstances" (Vasilopoulos 2016, p. 294). This study follows Vasilopoulos' (2016) recommendation and explores the international graduate students' academic experience as a fluid process that considers their language ability, emotions, belonging, ideal self, along with the social structure, norms, and values.

Purpose and objectives

This study explored factors affecting international graduate students' adjustment in U.S. academic settings. Specifically, we sought to identify those academic norms perceived as expected knowledge but were unfamiliar to many international students in agricultural education programs.

Methodology

The current and past international graduate students who graduated after 2016 (N = 26) were invited to participate in an hour-long interview. Researchers successfully interviewed 12 of these individuals between September 2021 to February 2022. Interview questions included students' experience in the classroom, fulfilling assistantship roles, and interacting with individuals in the agricultural education programs. Interviews were conducted via Zoom, were audio-recorded and transcribed, and analyzed using MAXQDA. The constant comparison method was used to compare and generate themes. As a subjective statement, both authors attended agricultural education graduate programs in the U.S. as international students and are currently faculty members in a land-grant university.

Findings

Three themes emerged regarding the academic adjustment issues of international graduate students in agricultural education programs.

Expectation of Class Participation

Students recognized the different expectations for class participation in the U.S. compared to their home country and found the adjustment challenging. Student A shared that.

"It's rare to have class participation in [country], but it is common in the U.S.... It's frustrating when you have to be part of a discussion in the middle of a class. I have to turn my google translator on so that I can attempt to communicate in class."

Student B shared, "I don't know when to insert my comments in a class discussion. When I have organized my thoughts and am ready to share, that conversation is over." Students C and D indicated the challenges to participate in discussions impromptu. Student D said, "I was a talkative one in my classes in [country], but in the U.S., I can't participate well without any preparation ahead of time."

Languages that Exclude International Students

Participants described their struggles in understanding languages that most of their peers in agricultural education are familiar with. Student A shared that "'FFA,' '4H,' 'Ag Day,' 'Farm Bureau' are what everyone knows except for me." Student E shared his observation of international students' struggle to understand other general concepts such as plagiarism:

"I wish there was a class at the beginning.... that teach about writing, citation, and all that. When you come from a different educational system, it might be the first time you [have] ever heard about it. You hear the word plagiarism, and you don't know what that meant exactly."

Experiences of Indifference

International students feel that their voices are not heard in the classroom. Student A shared that "When I share my perspective, it takes me more time to explain the background for others to understand, and there is usually a very little discussion about what I said. I feel if I am not attending class, no one will notice or care." Student B stated similarly, "The class is indifferent

to what I say.” Student E echoed this statement that he would sometimes opt not to ask questions in the classroom because of the fear of having to repeat themselves.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Findings revealed the challenges faced by international graduate students in U.S. agricultural education programs. These challenges limit the students’ classroom participation and deny them opportunities to share knowledge, skills, and experiences. Furthermore, these challenges create an “otherness” among these students. When the language barrier is added to the assumed academic norms, the academic setting becomes a source of unhealthy anxiety to the international students.

We recommend that agricultural education programs use formal and informal opportunities to provide support. For example, orientations and seminars discussing proper citation and writing tips can facilitate understanding the meaning and consequences of plagiarism. Peer mentors can be selected to help international students understand the unique culture and history of agricultural education. Additionally, to facilitate an inclusive environment for international students to participate in class, instructors can share discussion questions ahead of time to allow international students to prepare a few talking points.

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