

2023

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Recommended Citation

Alfaraj, H. and Alyoser, A. (2023) "The Perceptions of College Life Among International Music Students at American Universities," *Information Sciences Letters*: Vol. 12 : Iss. 2 , PP -. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.aaru.edu.jo/isl/vol12/iss2/61>

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The Perceptions of College Life Among International Music Students at American Universities

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Received: 12 Aug. 2022, Revised: 5 Sep. 2022, Accepted: 27 Oct. 2022.

Published online: 1 Feb. 2023.

Abstract: The purpose of this multiple-case study is to explore and describe the rewards and challenges facing international music students at American Universities. The research included two major questions: (a) what rewards and challenges do international music students face at an American university? And (b) what motivation do they have for graduating from an American university? Data collection included: semi-structured interview, field notes from observation, and focus group interview. The participants were three graduate international music students attending two major music institutions in the Midwestern United States. There were five emergent themes from the data analysis: institution preference, important of music in the U.S., social barrier, satisfaction of the program attending, and opportunities. The results from this research support earlier research in the literature that music international students preferred university in the United States because they felt the importance of music education in U.S. public education. Second, they preferred institutions with quality faculty and programs. Furthermore, international students attend American universities for better employment opportunities. In addition, they encountered social barriers in interacting with local students even without the language barrier.

Keywords: International Students; Music Students, American Universities.

1 Introduction

International student enrollment at American universities has increased during the past decade (Institute of International Education 2013) [1]. Students came from all over the world from diverse cultures; according to Opendoors (2013) report of international students in the United States, most international students were from China with 29%, 12% India, 9% South Korea, 5% Saudi Arabia, and 45% from other countries [1]. Furthermore, the report indicated that more students majored in business and management with 22%, followed by 19% engineering; while agriculture, education, and humanities were the less attractive majors for international students [1].

Earlier research argued that studying overseas is rewarding for international students and host countries. Lee and Rice (2007, 386) explained that hosting international students is rewarding because first, it will enrich the university environment with different population groups, and it will increase the understanding and appreciation for other cultures among the students. Second, whether international students stay at the U.S. or return to their homeland, they will be considered worthy additions to the community they live in [2]. Moreover, Wu, Garza, & Guzman (2015, 1), indicated that hosting international students “are extremely crucial to US higher education for both academic prestige and financial benefits” [3]. But what really happens when someone moves to study in a different country with a different culture and language?

International students blend with the community in their daily life, they live at the university dorm or in a local neighborhood. They eat and shop from local restaurants and stores; older international students may bring their children and enroll them in a local school. Much research was focused on international student’s life and to provide enhanced experience for the international students and for the hosting university (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2001) [4]. Tas (2013, 14) stated “Finding a way to acculturate these students into communities and campuses will not only enrich their lives but will increase the possibility of retaining them as students and allowing them to complete their educational goals” [5].

International Students Challenges

Moving to a different community and living away from home represents significant challenges for international and domestic students (Thurber & Walter, 2012) [6]. Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, (2010, 63), defined seven areas they consider

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challenges for international students including: language issues, adapting to new cultural norms, cultural misunderstandings, financial problems, friends and social support, and inclusion in the local and the university community [7]. In the literature of research related to international students, language challenges were a major theme that frequently appeared in the results. In a study of international Asian doctoral students, Sato and Hodge (2009, 142) explained that presenting, drafting papers, and reading assignments in a different language are considered the largest challenges for international doctoral students [8].

Furthermore, a recent study classified challenges that are encountered by international students into three categories including academic barrier, social barrier, and cultural barrier (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015, 5) [3]. Under the academic barrier the study reported that international students had issues with first, interacting with the faculty, second, they were isolated from their classmates, in addition to the language barrier (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015, 6) [3]. Moreover, other research reported common homesickness, depression, and anxiety between international students due to the culture shock [6]. All these challenges may affect the mental and physical health of the international students. It can lead to low self-esteem, or bad dieting behavior [9]. Yet, international students have many reasons to attend universities overseas, mostly for a better education and future [10].

Many factors influence the choice of international students when studying overseas. Among these factors most students indicated that their institution's choice was based on institution's reputation, faculty quality, student's links to the institutions through other alliance institution, number of students enrolled, and institution that recognize student's qualifications [11]. Are international music students any different than other international students?

In research regarding international music students from East Asia, Choi stated that professors' reputation, scholarships, and program's reputation were the most crucial factors that influenced students' choices [12]. Choi also reported that good relationship with faculty and worthy feedback were among the highest factor that enhanced East Asian academic success [12]. In addition, Choi stated that language factor was less important than other factors for music students; and he argued that for music students conversational English is considered more important than English writing [12]. How about other challenges faced by international music students?

Purpose

There was a lack of research related to international music students attending American universities. This research explores and describes the experience of this group of students.

Research questions

I conduct this research with two major questions: (a) what rewards and challenges do international music students face at an American university? And (b) what motivation do they have for graduating from an American university?

2 Method

This research used multiple-case study method to describe the rewards and challenges of international music students who attend American universities. According to Creswell, (2013, 100) multiple-case study is "good approach when the inquirer has clearly identifiable cases... and seeks to provide in-depth understanding of the cases" [13]. I used purposeful sampling to decide on the participants of this study; purposeful sampling as explained by Creswell (2013, 156) [13].

Participants were three graduate international music students attending two major music institutions in the Midwestern United States. There were two male participants and one female participant from South Africa and Italy. Participants included a pianist, general music teacher, and a conductor; all of them were in their mid-twenties.

Data collection included: semi-structured interview, field notes from observation, and focus group interview. The semi-structured interview lasted about 45 minutes for each participant; the questions developed for the interview were entirely based on the literature review and focused on the research questions. First section of the interview focused on the background and motivation of attending a US university. While the second section focused on the challenges and difficulties of being an international student. These interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed into word documents.

The researcher attended a class and a rehearsal for each of the participants as nonparticipant observer [13]. The observation's purpose was to determine the level of engagement between the participants and the class environment.

The focus group interview with the three participants was focused on two issues. The first issue was how to best practice coping with international students' challenges; and second, suggestion and advice for future music international students.

To analyze the data, within-case analysis for each of the participants was conducted followed by cross-case analysis for the emergent themes [13]. First, embedded analysis was used; and triangulation between the three data sources for each participant -interview, field notes, and focus group participation- was conducted looking for emergent themes. Second, comparison was conducted between the three participants to conclude the final themes [13].

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. First, triangulation between the three sources of data was conducted to confirm the emergent themes; according to Creswell, (2013, 260) “this process involves corroborating from different sources to shade light on theme or perspective” [13]. Second, participants reviewed the findings to confirm the emergent themes. Third, a colleague and music education researcher will review the methodology and findings to provide feedback and enhance the credibility of the research [13].

Procedures

After receiving approval from the research institutional review board, the researcher started recruiting participants by explaining the study's purpose to music international students on campus. The three graduate music international students voluntarily participated in this study and signed the consent form. They were given new names for their privacy.

Clarifying researcher bias

As an international student, I tried to separate my personal experience and conduct the research based on the data collected from the three participants; in addition, all emergent themes were reviewed and approved by them.

Limitation of the study

The three participants of this study learned English early in their life so there was no language barrier. Two of the participants are white; and according to the literature review white international students' experiences were more positive than international students from other ethnicities [2]. In addition, the findings of this study are restricted to graduate international music students with an excellent English proficiency and Western music background.

3 Results and discussion

There were five emergent themes from the data analysis:

- Institution preference
- Important of music in the U.S.
- Social barrier
- Satisfaction of the program attending
- Opportunities

To answer the first research question –what rewards and challenges do international music students face at an American university?

Rewards - *Institution preference*

The responses of the participants of this research regarding the institution preferences support earlier research findings [11,12]. Mazzarol & Soultar, (2002, 89) stated that international students might choose the institution based on “whether an institution is willing to recognize students’ qualification” [11].

Zach is a conductor and international student from Italy. He had an early experience about the music education in the United States because of a student exchange program; he lived and studied in the United States for a year as a high school student. Zach explained that the institution provided understanding of his qualification and made it easier for him to apply. He stated:

When I decided to apply the deadlines were already expired, but my institution was still accepting late applications. I applied and sent some videos of my performance. Because they usually ask for a video audition and then you must do a live audition here. And since I was late, I talked to the school and explained that I could not make it in time for the live audition. And they understand my issue they said they will evaluate my video audition and that is it. That was extremely helpful.

Furthermore, Mazzarol & Soultar (2002, 89) indicated that international students might apply to an institution that has “links or alliance with other institutions familiar to the student, and institution’s reputation of having a high-quality staff” [11]. That was the case of Sara who is an international music education graduate student from South Africa. She

was a general music teacher before she came to the United States; she participated in this research during her second year in the program. When asked about what influenced her institution's choice she indicated:

My only music education connection here in the United States was my boyfriend's teacher. My boyfriend is attending an institution that has partnership with the one I am attending now. And then I read about the professors here and I was amazed by the big names involved with this institution, so it was obviously an excellent choice for me.

In addition, Choi (2012) indicated the professor's reputation to be the highest factor that influenced the destination preferences for international music students from East Asia [12]. Gary, who is a pianist and graduate student from South Africa, applied to this institution specifically to study with a certain professor. He indicated that:

Specifically, the teacher whom I am studying with is a much-known teacher, and he also tours a lot in Africa, and I had a chance to meet him there. I went to a musical festival in Italy to meet him personally. So, I came here to specifically to be his student.

Important of music education in the U.S.

Mazzarol and Soultter (2002) indicated that institution's reputation is considered the highest influential factor for international students' institution preference [11]. The three participants agreed that the United States was their first preference because as they stated it has a quality music education, and music plays a key role in the education in the United States.

Zach: I already had an experience about the United States from the exchange program. I like the system and the fact music plays a significant role in education, while in my country music is like a personal choice.

Sara: First when I was at home teaching, I did not have a lot of guidance in terms of music education, at that time I started using resources on the internet and they were all coming from the United States. And then I started looking on some music education websites from the United States such as NAFME (National Association for Music Education) without knowing what it was and being amazed by the kind of questions being asked, and some music education journals. All my music performing friends were going overseas and I decided I wanted to do this. But I also specifically decided to go to the United States because of the status of music education here.

Gary: I like the way that people think about music in this country.

Challenges- social barrier

The results of this study regarding the international students' challenges supported previous research findings by Wu, Garza, & Guzman (2015, 8) [3]. Zach and Sara reported social barriers when interacting with local students.

Zach: Some American Students are Maybe not interested in making new friends... not everyone a lot of them are very friendly. It is just I had that idea about Americans being very friendly and like easy going. But that was not the truth.

Sara: I still struggle to go out with just American friends on my own without my boyfriend... I feel alienated, and like I do not get their humor always. I keep trying to do it repeatedly.

Aside from social barriers, international students have a lot of motivation to graduate from American universities. In this research, the following themes were found satisfaction of the program and opportunities.

Satisfaction of the program

None of the participants reported serious academic challenges. According to the literature review there were two reasons for not having academic challenges as an international student. First, most of the academic challenges resulted from language barrier which has not appeared in this study (Sherry, Thomas, and Chui, 2010, 44; Sato and Hodge, 2009, 145) [7,8]. And second because in music oral English skills might be more significant than writing skills (Choi, 2012, 358) [12]. Furthermore, the three participants indicated prominent levels of satisfaction concerning the program they are attending.

Zach: It was a good thing that we got to practice a lot with ensembles and orchestras, which I did not get to do in my country because we had very few rehearsals with the orchestra. But especially with conductors, having the possibility of working with a real orchestra is a unique experience because it is hard to get together as an orchestra every week. And I know many schools have less rehearsals than we have, so I know it is important here. Yes, living the experience is the grandiose thing here

Sara: I find that academically I thrived here. I really come into my own more than at home. I am happy with the program I am attending, and I like the fact that it is so coursework oriented. I like the fact that there is an interest in

global music education or world music as they call it here.

Gary: In addition to the piano faculty, there are many decent pianists here. I learned even more from my peers because as I said you must apply and prepare for competitions and when I see my peers practicing or doing a certain thing that may inspire me. In general, the school's environment is competitive and uplifting.

Furthermore, the three participants explained that graduating from an American university will provide better opportunities for employment supporting earlier research finding by (Hazen and Alberts, 2006; Daily, Farewell, and Kumar, 2010, 59) [10,14].

Zach: I am planning to establish contacts and relationships like job relationships to get started. And studying here will give me more opportunities to do so.

Sara: I believe it will open a lot of doors for me in terms of employment and just having the qualifications. And more than that I have grown so much more than I had at home. Part of that is because I moved to another country ... So, I feel like I will be much better at my job as well as have more job opportunities.

Gary: It is for the better to have a well-known university in your CV; it will make it easier to find a job.

4 Discussion

The results from this research support earlier research in the literature review that music international students preferred university in the United States because they felt the importance of music education in U.S. public education. Second, they preferred institutions with quality faculty and programs. Furthermore, international students attend American universities for better employment opportunities. In addition, they encountered social barriers in interacting with local students even without the language barrier.

The three participants felt that music education in the United States has a higher rank than music education in their home countries. Thus, they decided to study in the United States if United States provides quality music education –as they found it due to their level of satisfaction. According to the literature review this is one of the main reasons for international students to attend universities overseas (Mazzarol & Soultter, 2002, 88; Choi, 2012, 354) [11,12].

Second, the institution's faculty was a key influential factor that attracted music international students to apply for a university. This factor might appear more with art international students than their peers from other majors due to the tradition of art education –the relation between the expert artist and his/her students. However, in the literature review the faculty quality is considered a chief point when it comes to the international student's institution preference (Mazzarol and Soultter, 2002, Choi, 2012; Daily, Farewell, and Kumar, 2010) [11,12,14].

Third, the main motivation factor to graduate from American university for the participants of this research was for better job opportunities. Which is not surprising as Daily, Farewell, and Kumar (2010, 69) found that “opportunities for post-graduate employment” among the factor considered most important in a survey for international students [14].

The participants suggested that new international students should find an international students' community to help them cope with homesickness and stress as Sara stated:

You will get involve with American students eventually when you participate in any event from the university. But I would suggest specifically seeking out other international students. Because as I said there is nothing to help you feel less alienated than seeing someone go through some other things you are going through. Because you know some other culture shock things affect you so personally. And it is not like you are suddenly reaching a crisis in your life, it is just something you are going through because you moved to a different country so that advice from someone who has been there or someone that is going through it is valuable.

However, earlier research indicated that it is vital for international students to blend with the local students to increase the opportunities for communication. In addition, building relationships with the local students will decrease feelings of homesickness or being alienated (Hendrickson et al., 2011) [4].

For the limitation of the sample results of this study should not be generalized. Different results might be found when applying this research on international students without English proficiency or from a different musical background.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict regarding the publication of this paper.

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