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Areli D. Benitez
University of Southern California

Daniel Park
University of Southern California

Sarah Bream
University of Southern California Chan Division of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy

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Abstract

International students who enroll in American occupational therapy academic programs must quickly adapt to the academic demands and everyday life rhythms within the United States. This qualitative study contributes to the body of knowledge of lived experiences of international occupational therapy students, specific to their transition to graduate occupational therapy education and daily life in a new country. Thirteen (13) international occupational therapy graduate students and alumni participated in an individual or joint interview. Three key themes emerged from the findings and include the following: 1) Challenges: Inside and Outside of the Classroom, 2) A Support System: A Home Away from Home, and 3) Giving Back to my Home Country: Improving Occupational Therapy Education, Practice, and Research. This study provides insights into the challenges experienced by international graduate occupational therapy students and alumni, strategies that are beneficial in supporting them as they transition into graduate level education and daily life within the United States, and their motivations for giving back to their home countries.

Keywords

Occupational therapy education, international students, transition, challenges, supports

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Areli Benitez, OTD, OTR/L

Daniel Park, OTD, OTR/L

Sarah Bream, OTD, OTR/L

University of Southern California

United States

ABSTRACT

International students who enroll in American occupational therapy academic programs must quickly adapt to the academic demands and everyday life rhythms within the United States. This qualitative study contributes to the body of knowledge of lived experiences of international occupational therapy students, specific to their transition to graduate occupational therapy education and daily life in a new country. Thirteen (13) international occupational therapy graduate students and alumni participated in an individual or joint interview. Three key themes emerged from the findings and include the following: 1) Challenges: Inside and Outside of the Classroom, 2) A Support System: A Home Away from Home, and 3) Giving Back to my Home Country: Improving Occupational Therapy Education, Practice, and Research. This study provides insights into the challenges experienced by international graduate occupational therapy students and alumni, strategies that are beneficial in supporting them as they transition into graduate level education and daily life within the United States, and their motivations for giving back to their home countries.

The number of international students studying in the United States has been steadily increasing since 1949 and in the 2019/2020 school year, there were a total of 1,075,496 international students (Institute of International Education, 2020a). Of these 1.1 million, approximately 35% were seeking a graduate degree (Institute of International Education, 2020b). Although the national trend of international students studying in the United States has steadily been increasing, the number of international students enrolled in health profession programs has been plateauing and decreasing (Institute of International Education, 2020c). A recent caveat to the historical trend of increasing

international student enrollments has been the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, combined with federal administration policies such as travel bans which limit international students' ability to enter the United States. These factors resulted in reduced numbers of international student enrollments this past year across United States academic programs. Currently, there are no available national statistics capturing international student enrollment across American occupational therapy programs.

A review of the literature across international and domestic sources indicates numerous reasons international students are motivated to pursue professional education abroad, with many studies coming out of Australia and the United States in particular. Key motivators to pursue a Western education include discontent with the universities in their home countries, frustration with the admissions processes of their local institutions, limited academic and/or professional program options available, and pedagogical approaches utilized in instruction (Altbach, 2004; Chao et al., 2017). The number of universities relative to the number of student applicants is limited in many countries, leading to a highly competitive admissions process that in some cases are based on race/ethnicity or other social categories (Altbach, 2004; Pandey & Pandey, 2018). Further, international students frequently pursue graduate degrees or specializations that are not commonly available at home (Altbach, 2004). American institutions are especially seen to be leaders in many professional fields, and this high regard leads international students to believe that an American education will improve career opportunities both in their home country and internationally (Obst & Forster, 2005). Research out of Monash University in Australia also identified the perceived value of international practice education as an opportunity to develop communication skills and integrate theory into practice in a country where the occupational therapy profession is well-established (Lalor et al., 2019).

Although motivations are high for an internationally-based education, the literature points out that many students face formidable adjustment challenges once they arrive. A major acculturation stressor for many international students in English-speaking institutions is the language barrier that affects both academic and social domains (Mori, 2000; Park et al., 2017; Sawir et al., 2012; Yu, et al., 2017). Within the academic realm, lack of fluency with English and unfamiliarity with local idioms can impact the ability to complete assignments, comprehend lectures and examinations, and have confidence to ask questions in class. In addition to the language barrier, a Western pedagogical approach that emphasizes team-based learning, 'flipped' classrooms, and other interactive teaching methods create a stark contrast to many international pedagogical models (Akçayir & Akçayir, 2018; Hrynychak & Batty, 2012; Lim et al., 2016). Challenges related to the distinctions between the teaching methodology coupled with the language barrier may impact performance and adaptation of the international student (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008).

Although most international students adapt successfully to their new academic and cultural environments, it is also true they report anxiety, post-traumatic stress, loneliness, and other mental health symptoms at significant rates (Hyun et al., 2007; Zheng & West-Olatunji, 2016). For instance, a 2013 study of 130 international university students from China found that 45% of students reported depressive symptoms and 29% reported anxiety that significantly affected their well-being and academic performance (Han et al., 2013). Within the social domain, difficulties with language and communication can contribute to challenges navigating social situations, leading to feelings of isolation (Poyrazli et al., 2004). Financial hardship due to varying currency exchange rates, higher living expenses, and limited employment opportunities and financial aid options may further impact the mental health of international students and cause higher levels of stress and anxiety (Yan, 2017). Lastly, international occupational therapy students have reported uncertainty of the transferability of their Western-based occupational therapy education to the cultural expectations and structural realities in their home countries (Lim et al., 2016).

Despite the challenges, the literature reveals motivations to pursue an American-based education remain high among the international community. Likewise, the challenges to a successful acculturation of international students are great. Currently, there is limited data on international students' experiences within an American occupational therapy graduate program.

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to identify and understand international students' and alumni perspectives on their transition to graduate level occupational therapy education and daily life in the United States.

Background

This study was conducted in the occupational therapy department of a large urban university on the West Coast of the United States. This university is a major hub for international education, consistently ranking amongst the top three universities in the United States with the highest international student enrollment. As of 2021, its international student enrollment was 11,729, comprising 23% of its student body. The occupational therapy department itself typically attracts between 50 - 70 international students at bachelor's, master's, and doctoral levels, situating it as one of the occupational therapy programs in the country with the highest number of international student enrollments. Of note, the department's post-professional master's program consists almost entirely of international students, with an annual average enrollment ranging from 25-35 students. The Philippines, Taiwan, India, South Korea, Hong Kong, China, and Saudi Arabia are the students' most common countries of origin.

To address the various needs of the international student body, the occupational therapy department houses an "*Office of Global Initiatives*," which is staffed by one full-time faculty member (an author of this study), clinical doctorate (Occupational Therapy Doctoral) residents, and a team of graduate student workers. The *Office of Global Initiatives* is dedicated to providing comprehensive support to the department's

international students, and operates a number of mentorship and academic support programs, hosts social networking opportunities and information sessions relevant to international student concerns, and advocates for international student representation at the departmental and university level. The *Office of Global Initiatives* also maintains close relationships with international student alumni as they transition to the workforce and as they take on global leadership roles in their home countries.

Methodology

In order to effectively answer the research question, “What are the lived experiences of international students as they transition into the United States and a graduate level occupational therapy program?”, a qualitative approach was warranted. Qualitative description was deemed a suitable method to capture the nuances of students’ lived experiences as affected by a wide array of social, environmental, physical, and educational factors (Sandelowski, 2000; Sandelowski, 2010). The study followed a descriptive design that consisted of participant interviews and qualitative content analysis (Sandelowski, 2000; Sandelowski, 2010). Data collection and analysis resulted in an understanding of the challenges experienced by international students enrolled in a graduate occupational therapy academic program in the United States, as well as factors that supported their transition, and motivations pertaining to their future careers.

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the university provided permission to conduct the study.

Recruitment

Recruitment efforts utilized purposeful sampling (Oliver & Robinson, 2014) to identify international occupational therapy students and alumni who could help answer the research question. Authors recruited current international students and alumni to capture their lived experience as they entered an American occupational therapy program and as they transitioned from student to practitioner within the United States. Authors believed it was important to include recent alumni perspectives to fully understand how occupational therapy programs can better support international individuals during their American occupational therapy education and post-graduation. International occupational therapy students enrolled at the same institution assisted two of the authors in the recruitment and data collection process, and were therefore ineligible to participate in the study. Domestic occupational therapy students also assisted in this process. Recruitment efforts targeted graduate occupational therapy students and alumni from the same university. Outreach communications consisted of email, social media posts (e.g. Instagram and Facebook) and in-person announcements before class sessions. Recruitment efforts reached 34 enrolled international graduate occupational therapy students and 12 alumni who had graduated in the last five (5) years. Potential participants were informed of the purpose of the study; logistics, such as time commitment, location of activity, and facilitators; and offered the option of either an individual or focus group interview.

Participants

Thirteen (13) participants consented to participate in the study. Ten (10) participants were students enrolled in a post-professional occupational therapy degree program (master's or doctorate) and three (3) were alumni who had graduated within the last two (2) years from the same institution.

Participant eligibility criteria included the following:

- international student
- enrolled in a graduate occupational therapy program in the United States OR
- international student alumni who had completed an occupational therapy program in the United States

Table 1 presents the characteristics of the participants included in the study.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	Home Country	Degree Program	Individual Interview or Focus Group	Student status at time of interview
#1	Canada	Doctorate	Individual Interview	Enrolled
#2	China	Master's	Individual Interview	Enrolled
#3	China	Master's	Individual Interview	Enrolled
#4	India	Master's	Individual Interview	Alumni
#5	India	Master's	Individual Interview	Enrolled
#6	Ireland	Doctorate	Individual Interview	Alumni
#7	Philippines	Master's	Individual Interview	Alumni
#8	Philippines	Master's	Joint Interview	Enrolled
#9	Singapore	Master's	Individual Interview	Enrolled
#10	South Africa	Master's, Doctorate	Individual Interview	Enrolled
#11	South Korea	Master's	Individual Interview	Enrolled
#12	Taiwan	Master's	Joint Interview	Enrolled
#13	Venezuela	Master's, Doctorate	Individual Interview	Enrolled

Design and Procedures

The study followed a descriptive design consisting of participant interviews and qualitative content analysis (Sandelowski, 2000). Following the informed consent process, participants self-selected to an individual or focus group interview. No focus groups were completed secondary to individual interviews aligning better with participants' schedules. However, one joint interview with two participants was completed. A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate the interviews. A different interview guide for the joint interview was created to capitalize on the pair dynamic and stimulate conversation. Alumni participants were asked to reflect back and answer questions related to the time when they were currently enrolled students. Refer to Table 2 for the interview guides.

Eleven (11) individual interviews and one (1) joint interview with two individuals were conducted in English by five graduate occupational therapy students. Each interview was held in-person or via telephone and lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were audio recorded, and interviewers took abbreviated notes. During the data collection process, interviewers remained in consistent communication with one another to ensure uniformity in the process. The audio recordings were transcribed.

Table 2

Interview Guide

Individual Interview Guide
Tell me about how you came to study occupational therapy in the United States. Why did you choose to study in the United States? What are your educational goals?
What are some core differences between studying in your home country and studying in the United States?
What barriers have you faced within the United States educational system? Tell me about a time when you encountered a barrier while studying here. Tell me about a time when you received support that was helpful to you while studying in the United States
What barriers have you faced in adjusting to life here in the United States?
What supports have been most helpful in overcoming these barriers?
How do you believe you will be able to implement/utilize your United States-based education as a practitioner in the future?
Do you plan to return to your home country after graduating?
How do you believe your education, specifically in the United States, will help you in

<p>transitioning to practice as an occupational therapist? If planning to move back to your home country after graduating, how do you believe completing your education within the United States has made you a better practitioner in your home country? If planning to remain in the United States, how do you believe your education has helped you in being competent to treat/interact with clients within the United States?</p>
<p>Interview with Two Participants Guide</p>
<p>How was it that you were introduced to a post-professional master's program in the United States?</p>
<p>Why did you choose to obtain a higher-level degree than the standard in your home country?</p>
<p>What are some core differences between studying in your home country and studying in the United States?</p>
<p>What barriers do you face within the United States educational system?</p>
<p>What supports are most helpful in overcoming these barriers?</p>
<p>Are there any specific types of support that you wish to receive/that you believe would be helpful to you?</p>
<p>Do you plan on returning to your home country in the future? If yes, what do you see yourself doing as it pertains to work when you return to your home country? If no, why not?</p>
<p>Is there anything we should have talked about, but didn't?</p>

Consideration of Bias

The interviewers were enrolled at the same institution and familiar with many of the study participants. In an effort to reduce the confluence of bias, interviewers practiced self-reflexivity and assessed their own biases and motivations to determine whether they were suited for data collection. After the interviewers assessed their own biases and assumptions, the second author opted out of data collection, as he believed his faculty and administrative leadership role within the university would compromise the criteria of sincerity (Tracy, 2010). Prior to the data analysis process, the third author was approved by the IRB. The third author was not familiar with the study participants nor the subject matter of the interview guide prior to commencing data analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted by the three authors. The transcribed interviews were randomly delegated to each author to ensure that each data set would be reviewed initially by at least two of the authors. Each author completed multiple readings of the transcribed interviews, and noted interpretations of the qualitative data during each read-through. Following the completion of this initial review, the transcribed interviews were rotated across the authors a second time, and this process was repeated, whereby each transcribed interview was reviewed by all three authors. The authors came together five (5) times to share their interpretations and engage in further group-based analysis of the interview data. Through this group-based analysis, authors further refined their interpretations of the data to reach consensus on the main ideas that emerged from the interviews. These findings have been organized into the three (3) key themes that are presented in this paper.

Trustworthiness

Authors strived to achieve trustworthiness, credibility, and verisimilitude of the research findings. To gain qualitative credibility, authors practiced thick description, triangulation, and multivocality (Tracy, 2010). *Thick description*, as described by Tracy (2010), is providing readers with plentiful concrete detail and culturally situated meanings. *Thick description* was adopted by providing ample background describing where the study took place and by adding multiple, direct quotes for each theme that hoped to provide readers with enough detail for them to come up with their own conclusions versus the authors merely telling readers what to believe. *Triangulation* was also adopted to ensure credibility. As described by Denzin (1978), triangulation assumes that if two or more sources of data, types of data collected, theoretical frameworks, and/or researchers converge on the same conclusion, then the conclusion is more credible. Authors met five times to thoroughly discuss their interpretations of the data and to ensure all three points of view converged on the main themes emerging from the participants' voices. The concept of *multivocality*, providing multiple and varied voices throughout the data collection and data analysis process, and engaging in effective collaboration with participants, was also practiced (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002; Tillmann-Healy, 2003). Authors strived to recruit participants within different occupational therapy programs (master's and doctorate) and differing home countries. As previously discussed, interviewers practiced self-reflexivity before conducting interviews to ensure no potential bias was being internalized. Interviewers, having worked within the Office of Global Initiatives, held collegial relationships with the participants in the study, leading to multivocality and ensuring credibility.

Results

Data analysis revealed three (3) key themes: 1) Challenges: Inside and Outside of the Classroom, 2) A Support System: A Home Away from Home, and 3) Giving Back to my Home Country: Improving Occupational Therapy Education, Practice, and Research. The first theme, Challenges: Inside and Outside of the Classroom, describes the challenges international students experienced as they transitioned to graduate level occupational therapy education and daily life within the United States. Four (4) subcategories surfaced within this first theme and consist of a) differences in

pedagogical methods, b) English language proficiency, c) barriers identified in daily life, and 4) transitioning into the workforce. The second theme, Support System: A Home Away From Home, describes supportive strategies that eased this transition. The final theme, Giving Back to my Home Country: Improving Occupational Therapy Education, Practice, and Research Back Home, reveals motivations pertaining to their future careers.

Theme I: Challenges: Inside and Outside of the Classroom

The first theme highlights the myriad of challenges international students and alumni experienced when acclimating into an American graduate occupational therapy program and workforce. The theme is divided into four (4) subcategories to highlight the wide array of challenges.

A) Differences in Pedagogical Methods

Study participants revealed striking differences in pedagogical methods between the United States and international countries, which contributed to the challenges international students experienced within the occupational therapy academic program in the United States. Several study participants indicated that pedagogy in their home country is more “passive” than that of a United States-based occupational therapy curriculum. The expectation when in their home country was to absorb the information and listen versus to participate and be comfortable with voicing their perspectives within the classroom. The following excerpts from the transcripts reveal these notable differences in pedagogy that resulted in challenges experienced by the international students:

“[In my home country], the students sit and the teacher will give a lecture for like three hours, so you’re just sitting there and listening and all that. I felt like I was mute [when in the United States] when I could not or did not know what to respond or speak in class. I learned to be like a sponge and now it is hard to engage in class. I felt frustrated and felt misunderstood by professors. It’s not like we aren’t interested.” (Participant #12)

“I think studying in the United States.... the teacher is there to assist or...to guide, but when you’re in Asia, typically, your teacher or your instructor is someone that gives you all [the] knowledge....[the learner in] Asia is more passive. Students are passive, and in the United States you’re more active because you’re required to problem-solve or [utilize] clinical reasoning.” (Participant #7)

The culture of learning in the United States, specifically the notion of speaking up in class, was identified by participants as a different expectation than what was expected in many of their home countries. Expressing their own ideas in classroom discussions was perceived as a new skill that needed to be learned and developed. One participant grappled with the challenge of adapting to this new style of learning and acclimating to the new expectations:

“Do they expect us to speak up and ask more questions?” (Participant #2)

Difficulties in speaking up or not understanding how to respond to classroom discussions impacted the confidence levels of some international students, often leaving the student with a sense of frustration and/or feeling misunderstood by their professors. For example, by not speaking up in class, the student was perceived as being quieter than they typically might be (in a different context). On the contrary, another participant noted that the discussion-based format of classes in the United States helped to mold them into someone who is more open to asking questions, which they viewed as a positive outcome, despite the initial challenges of adjusting to the new style of learning.

These differences in pedagogy often required extra time and effort on the part of the international student(s) to effectively integrate the material. Some international students invested time and money towards additional writing workshops, writing/editing support services, and/or tutoring services to support their learning.

"The way they taught was different. So it was an extra effort for me, I had to learn what the teacher meant, how they do papers, what is defined as 'good' or 'bad' or 'excellent' and all that stuff." (Participant #8)

Other differences in pedagogy identified in the interview data included the expectation of more student presentations in the United States curriculum versus lecture-based classes the participants were accustomed to. Participants expressed that writing essays was difficult, as well as writing emails to professors, due to not fully knowing whether their use of language was accurate and/or whether the content in these written communications was professional.

B) English Language Proficiency

Numerous participants expressed frustration and difficulty associated with their English language proficiency. When asked about the barriers faced within the United States education system, participants correlated their English language proficiency with their academic performance. International students shared that they needed an extended amount of time to initially understand lectures, complete reading assignments, and finalize writing tasks. One participant stated the following:

"I abruptly came to a class that only speaks English. In the first few months it was very stressful for me. I used to record every class and then went back home and listened to it all over again to understand what the professor was talking about." (Participant #3)

Several participants shared that the language barrier resulted in a limited understanding of content discussed in class, as well as uneasiness with engaging in classroom discussion. A participant explained:

"I understood about 50 - 60% of each lecture when I first started the program, but now I understand about 90%. Originally this made it harder to engage." (Participant #12)

In addition, students perceived they were frequently dismissed due to English language proficiency in the classroom. Based upon their reflections, it was evident that the language barrier resulted in individuals' valuable perspectives being overlooked. One participant stated:

“We get dismissed often because we speak a different language, or we don't speak English that fluently, or because we have other points of view that are also valuable. I have seen people with good opinions and different experiences get dismissed. I have gotten dismissed earlier because of my language, beliefs, and culture. That is hard!” (Participant #13)

The interviews revealed that language proficiency also impacted students' daily living tasks and made it more difficult to develop friendships. Students stated they were nervous to make phone calls or order food and had difficulty forming social relationships with American students due to challenges stemming from language proficiency. On the contrary, if students were proficient in English or had completed undergraduate studies at an English-speaking institution, language was listed as a support to their adjustment in both academic and sociocultural domains within the United States. As one participant simply stated:

“My support was that English was my first language.” (Participant #6)

C) Barriers Identified in Daily Life

Study participants not only encountered challenges within the classroom but also had to adjust to their day-to-day experiences outside of the classroom. Participants expressed how overwhelming these experiences can be for international students, emphasizing how every aspect of daily life has changed, and how each experience is new, different, and extraordinarily complex. These changes also significantly affected their overall well-being as they strived to complete their American occupational therapy degree. As identified through the data, adapting to life in an unfamiliar urban area in the United States was no easy task for the international students who participated in this study. One participant expressed simply yet eloquently, “Everything is so different!” (Participant #9).

Barriers were identified across multiple domains of daily life, including but not limited to housing, healthcare, banking, transportation, meal planning and preparation, safety, and pursuing employment. Daily challenges ranged from, ‘Where do I buy furniture?’ (Participant #6) to learning about HMO versus PPO health insurance options. “How do I transfer doctors? How does one obtain a social security number needed for employment, and how can I figure out employment benefits with limited assistance and/or information?” (Participant #6). Study participants expressed a need for additional support in these key areas of daily living.

Finding housing was also very challenging and stressful for international students. Many study participants expressed that additional supports to locate and secure affordable housing would have been beneficial in supporting a smoother transition to life in the United States. One participant reported:

“Securing housing and utilities was extremely difficult because I did not possess a social security number or credit history; therefore I had to pay double the price of a typical security deposit to secure my apartment.” (Participant #11)

“It is expensive...so I have to share my housing. I have a roommate so I have to share with people from different cultures.” (Participant #10)

Challenges in the area of meal planning and preparation were also great and were associated with their English language proficiency (e.g., not knowing the English vocabulary for certain foods), uncertainty regarding which foods to purchase in the grocery store, and whether foods ordered in restaurants were aligned with dietary restrictions. Some international students reported they had never cooked for themselves prior to coming to the United States. One study participant described the overwhelming number of choices in grocery stores:

“Even going to the supermarket (was a challenge) and having 3,000 options for butter instead of just having one at home.” (Participant #5)

Another common barrier identified across several study participants included transportation. Buying a car was too expensive and therefore not an option, while accessing and navigating public transportation was extremely difficult and created great uncertainty. Within a large metropolitan city, the distances seemed quite far, learning the public transit system was complicated and inconvenient, and the amount of time traveling each day led to fatigue. Safety while utilizing public transportation was also a key concern.

“Transportation is really difficult... It takes forever! I usually use the school shuttles and public transportation but it can be scary to use public transportation at night.” (Participant #10)

“I do live on my own now. I used to live with my parents. Now, I have to cook and do laundry. I also have no car, so there is a lack of transportation. It is not as convenient to buy groceries, because I have to buy a lot of food and carry them to take Uber.” (Participant #1)

D) Transitioning into the Workforce

This theme revealed a new assortment of challenges for international students following graduation. Transitioning into the professional workforce in the United States was particularly difficult. The alumni participants indicated significant post-graduation challenges that were specifically tied to their international status. Challenges were often

related to procedural hiring practices of United States-based employers. Alumni reported frustrations regarding the limited number of employers who sponsored work visas. One participant stated:

“We had to look for companies that would give us our H1B sponsorship, and that was really tough, [especially] for people who were particular about the place of where the job is... We did not have a lot of opportunities and a lot of openings for jobs, and so it was a really tough time.” (Participant #4)

One participant reported they had to persistently advocate for employment in ways that their American colleagues did not. For instance, this participant attended a career fair where they met with multiple prospective employers. This participant learned that only three out of approximately 50 companies at the career fair sponsored work visas for international practitioners.

A second procedural hurdle reported by a participant was the Occupational Therapy Eligibility Determination (Occupational TherapyED), which is a process required for all individuals who complete a portion of their occupational therapy education outside the United States in order to sit for the National Board for Certification in Occupational Therapy (NBCOT) exam. This process entails paying an \$850 fee and submitting extensive documentation from a student's home country, including course syllabi (translated into English), transcripts, a form completed by the academic program director, and a professional practice history form. Delays in Occupational TherapyED processing can also have implications for graduates to stay in-status as they transition from a student visa (F-1) to Optional Practical Training (OPT) status. One participant stated:

“The Occupational TherapyED process took more than six months, which significantly delayed the start of my job search process, and my ability to generate income.” (Participant #7)

Beyond these procedural challenges, participants spoke about their struggles with the process of seeking employment in an unfamiliar professional environment. One participant stated that she was unsure which companies were trustworthy, as international students have shared stories of being victimized by unscrupulous organizations who took advantage of foreign practitioners. The participant also reported that the salary negotiation process was difficult and unfamiliar, saying:

“It was difficult to know which company you can and cannot trust when we were having these [salary] negotiations, because we [know] a lot of people who had gotten in trouble regarding this, to be able to negotiate for the pay that we actually deserve.” (Participant #4)

Study participants expressed reliance on support from experienced peers from their home country who mentored them through the job search and employment process post-graduation.

Theme II: A Support System: A Home Away From Home

Our second key theme identified several important resources that facilitated study participants' adaptation to daily life in the United States and to their graduate occupational therapy education. Participants frequently specified the importance of formal and informal support provided by their occupational therapy program's global office (*Global Initiatives*), which consisted of a team of faculty and students dedicated to supporting international students throughout their studies.

Study participants emphasized the value they found in formal academic support tailored to the needs of international students. A weekly 'international student study hall' was identified by participants as a valuable space for both community and practical support; and described by one as a "[warm] place to study" (Participant #2). In addition, the university's occupational therapy global office provided an international student academic tutor, an experienced occupational therapy graduate student who hosted open office hours and also met by appointment with international students for academic-related concerns. The tutor held training workshops on topics such as American Psychological Association (APA) formatting guidelines, and hosted study sessions for important exams. The value of this tutor was described by one participant as follows:

"We [international students] had difficulty with writing essays or how to format a paper and stuff, [the tutor] would always have something to support us...There was a lot of us who had the same problems, they [university's occupational therapy global office] would act on it." (Participant #7)

Participants spoke to the critical importance of support needed to ensure a sense of community and belonging within this new culture. The need for such supports were often spoken about quite passionately, with one student referencing the university's occupational therapy global office as "a home away from home." She elaborated:

"They have a way of making people feel that they belong....just knowing that there is a group of people that care about you and are trying to help you is very helpful." (Participant #10)

Data revealed that community-building efforts among the international student community began prior to their arrival in the United States, with the creation of a private Facebook group dedicated to the international student community. Once on campus, formally organized activities such as in-person social events and resources such as peer mentor/mentee groups exploring the city together ('having fun outside the classroom') were deemed highly important for cultivating a sense of comfort and belonging. The following reflections describe the value of these social supports in developing connections with one another:

"The office helped me meet people, have fun outside of the classroom. It was a support." (Participant #8)

“Events organized by *Global Initiatives* gave me more opportunities to interact with other students.” (Participant #4)

“*Global Initiatives* was a support. They hosted events with international students and visitors.” (Participant #4)

Relatedly, the value of international student peer mentorship networks were identified as effective tools in easing adaptation to life in the United States. In the formalized mentorship program, incoming international students were matched with a recent international student alumni ‘mentor,’ who provided friendship and guidance over the course of a full academic year. Whenever possible, mentors shared the same country of origin as the incoming international student. Many of the study participants described the value of mentorship pairs, reporting the relief they found in having a first ‘friend’ who had recently walked through the adjustment process. The instrumental and practical support for daily living offered by mentors (e.g. grocery store recommendations for food from their home country; job searching strategies after graduation) was also deemed important. The overall value of an investment in peer mentorship support is captured in the participant’s statement below:

“The mentor program, I have to say, was really helpful because it connected you to someone from the same country, or we went to the same school. I think that helped, because they’ve already been through the whole process. They can help you out.” (Participant #6)

The data revealed other resources that were helpful in supporting students’ adaptation to a graduate occupational therapy program and life in the United States included the University’s writing center, supportive and friendly professors, and technologies which connected them to their support network from their home country.

Theme III: Giving Back to my Home Country: Improving Occupational Therapy Education, Practice, and Research

The final theme was captured in nearly every interview. It was the desire participants held to utilize the advanced education they received in the United States to help improve occupational therapy education, practice, and research in their home countries. Participants expressed both a love for their country and an awareness of current limitations in the reach of the occupational therapy profession back home. One participant encapsulated the sentiments found in many interviews by stating:

“[Giving back] is my goal in life. I feel like I am privileged because of the education that I get here and it is not something that everyone in South America can get. I want to learn as much as I can so that I can go back and teach people as I was taught here.” (Participant #13)

Several interviewees stated that their motivation for coming to the United States was based, in part, on their desire to “fill in the gaps” in the occupational therapy profession in their home country, whether these gaps be in leadership, education, practice, and/or research. For instance, one participant stated that she would return home after graduating in order to re-invigorate the profession:

“[Occupational therapists there] need more leadership to better define themselves as occupational therapists, and to reignite the passion for occupational therapy.” (Participant #10)

Another participant described how there are very few opportunities to learn about occupational science in China, and this individual was motivated to return home in the future to mentor others in the utility of occupational science in both occupational therapy practice and research.

Several participants believed that they could serve as a “cultural bridge” between the models and theories they learned in the United States and their colleagues in their home countries. Participants spoke to the important work that needed to be done to adapt their new knowledge to the cultural contexts of their homes and acknowledged that uptake or buy-in would not happen otherwise. Participants stated:

“A lot of occupational science theory and knowledge and the practice of occupational therapy is influenced by the Western values, which I need to consider. I have to think how to adapt this to the Chinese culture.” (Participant #2)

“I need to learn how to adapt lifestyle-based interventions to bring back to my home country as I have doubts if it would be accepted without adapting it to my culture.” (Participant #9)

Study participants frequently mentioned their ambitions to serve as mentors and role models to occupational therapy colleagues in their home countries. As mentioned above, participants expressed the desire to bring to their home countries content knowledge of occupational therapy theories, models, and practices they learned in the United States, and in so doing, hoped to advance the occupational therapy profession in their home countries. Various participants described how they hoped to lead research laboratories, open clinics, and teach, and others indicated their desire to mentor occupational therapy colleagues on how to travel to the United States to complete graduate studies themselves.

Discussion

Interviews were conducted with 13 international graduate occupational therapy students or alumni residing in an urban area of the United States. Although students were from a variety of ethnic backgrounds and nationalities, participants provided responses that revealed common themes regarding challenges and supports they encountered during

their transition to the United States. The findings of this study provide insight on how occupational therapy academic programs can support international students as they transition into graduate level occupational therapy education and daily life within the United States.

The results of this study indicate that differences between pedagogical methods used in the United States and students' home countries contribute to the challenges experienced by international students. Many participants described the learning style within their home country as more "passive" versus "active," and therefore, required international students to dedicate more time and money towards additional supportive workshops or tutoring services to understand the differing pedagogical style. In addition, differing expectations within the classroom were identified, such as needing to be more vocal within the American classroom, expressing their own ideas, and use of professional language within both formal (e.g. writing assignments) and informal (e.g. emails to professors) settings, requiring international students to develop new skills in order to perform well within this new educational context. These findings remain consistent with previous studies that reveal international students have difficulties within their academic studies secondary to pedagogical differences and contrasting expectations within the classroom (Dorsett, 2017; Smith & Kahwaja, 2011). Previous research adds that academic stressors can lead to greater reactions to other areas of stress for international students, which can lead to increased levels of psychological distress (Smith & Kahwaja, 2011).

In addition, the study reveals that limited English language proficiency had a significant impact on students' adjustment within the American educational system. This finding is consistent with existing studies that describe how language affects international students' ability to complete writing assignments, take oral and written examinations, understand lectures, and engage in classroom discussion (Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Telbis et al., 2014). Additional studies provide evidence into the relationship between English language proficiency levels and students' ability to adjust, as well as its relationship to psychological symptoms. Previous authors found that students with higher levels of English language competency reported lower levels of adjustment difficulties and that language proficiency is a strong predictor of psychosocial adjustment (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). While the concept of being "dismissed" or "overlooked" within an American educational context due to being an international student was discussed in Wing's (2010) book, the current study revealed that being "dismissed" was due to a difference in language proficiency. Erichsen and Bolliger (2011) reported similar findings, in that international students report "invisibility" in their physical classroom, feeling unwanted, feeling different, and that their non-Western perspectives are not recognized or simply ignored. This concept of "invisibility" and "feeling ignored" should be further explored in future research studies, as this experience could lead to greater mental health issues and/or psychosocial distress among international students.

This study also reveals that international students experience countless challenges across all daily life domains. Findings from the current study identifies multiple challenges international students experience in daily life related to learning new systems and making decisions pertaining to housing, healthcare, banking/finances, transportation, food, safety, and employment. The current findings are consistent with Smith and Kawaha's (2011) review of the literature, which found that international students experienced practical, lifestyle stressors especially related to transportation, finances and work restrictions; and extend beyond existing literature to identify specific daily tasks that create challenges for this population. Although current literature reveals challenges within the cultural domain for international students, our study is able to identify the specific tasks that are difficult for international occupational therapy students in the United States. Identifying these challenging daily tasks can guide occupational therapy programs on what information and advice to include to incoming students in order to promote a successful transition.

Challenges beyond graduation were also identified for many international students as they seek to enter the occupational therapy workforce in the United States. Students reported both procedural hurdles (e.g., the Occupational Therapy Educational Determination process), as well as unfamiliarity with professional job-seeking norms and wariness about being taken advantage of. A key barrier international students face in securing employment was the scarcity of employers willing to undertake the international work-visa sponsorship process. This finding is consistent with other studies of international students' school-to-work transitions, where students from a variety of countries reported that, "no matter in terms of language skills or network, they [Americans] are more competitive than you" (Li et al., 2017, p. 15) due to the added hurdle of visa sponsorship (Dorsett, 2017). Similar studies indicate the desire for career counseling services that specifically prepare international students for the job search process (Heng, 2017).

Our study shows that comprehensive institutional supports (both formal and informal) provided by a university occupational therapy department can be a significant resource for international students in their transition to life in the United States, both within and outside the classroom. In this study, a departmental 'global office' dedicated to the needs of international students was described aptly as "a home away from home." The priorities of this office are consistent with best practices identified in literature, as existing research points to a need for dedicated university support offices to optimize international student success (Dorsett, 2017). Strategies that were deemed helpful by the current study participants included robust academic supports (e.g., graduate student 'tutor,' international student study halls, tailored workshops/training), as well as community-building activities and programming. The importance of attending to community and "belonging" needs were particularly salient in the interviews, with both formally-planned social events as well as more casual opportunities for friendship/connection frequently specified. These findings are in line with research

which shows that social connectedness among international students lowers adjustment difficulties, better prepares students for daily life and employment, and increases a sense of belonging (Duru & Poyrazli, 2011; Edgecombe et al., 2012; Montgomery & McDowell, 2009).

Relatedly, this study highlights the value of strong peer-based mentorship networks in academic programs. Occupational therapy international students report that the availability of international student/alumni mentors throughout their studies diminished their stress and provided a sense of familiarity and connection to their home country. Overall, personal connections that develop through these peer-based mentorship relationships are a key support in navigating the challenges faced in adjusting to life in the United States. Participants report the value of this program as being both practical and social. Several studies further explore the implications of social connections for international students, finding that a strong social network is significantly related to psychological adjustments and lower acculturative distress, higher confidence and self-esteem, and improved academic and professional outcomes (Edgecombe et al., 2012; Yusoff, 2012; Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Finally, the study highlights the compelling motivation for international students to utilize their education in the United States to contribute to the occupational therapy profession in their home countries. International students reported feeling a responsibility to mentor colleagues back home, to contribute to research, to teach, and to advocate for the advancement of the profession. This particular finding is not clearly reflected in existing research on international student motivations for study, as motivations identified in existing literature were generally found to be more focused on personal advancement and opportunity (Chao et al., 2017; Mostafa & Lim, 2020). The international students interviewed in this study reflected similar personal motivations, yet clearly expressed an additional desire to “give back.”

Limitations

This qualitative study has limitations. The participants were a convenience sample of international students enrolled within one graduate occupational therapy program located in an urban United States city. It is possible the interview data may be biased, as participants may have responded to queries in a manner that did not fully represent their experiences, such as holding back true perspectives or sharing only positive experiences, so as not to offend the investigators. Intentional efforts were made in the study design to limit this potential bias. It is important to note that despite the common themes that emerged through the interviews, lived experiences are ultimately unique to each individual, and one perspective may vary greatly from that of another participant. The results presented here are limited to the participants interviewed for this particular study and may not represent the views nor experiences of all international students. Factors such as culture, upbringing, life experiences, and socioeconomic status may impact personal experiences and perspectives, as well as the capacity to transition with

lesser or greater adversity and/or effectiveness into graduate studies in the United States. This study includes perspectives of international students from the Philippines, Ireland, India, South Korea, Singapore, Venezuela, Canada, China, South Africa, and Taiwan, and lacks perspectives of students from other parts of the world.

Implications for Occupational Therapy Education

The findings from this qualitative study have implications for graduate level occupational therapy academic programs in the United States. Given the striking differences in pedagogical methods between the U.S and other countries and recognizing the compounding nature that academic stress places on other life domains, it will be important to prevent potential adverse effects on the mental health among international students as they transition into a new academic program within a new country. To support this transition, once formally admitted to the academic program, the institution may provide international students with training modules that orient them to the typical pedagogical approaches utilized in the academic program. Gaining this perspective may allow a less abrupt adjustment at the start of the program.

Given the difficulties that language barriers frequently create, it will also be essential for occupational therapy academic programs in the United States to ensure that adequate language supports are available and accessible to admitted students. Linkage to writing centers, editing services, and/or tutors may help to bolster international students' skills in English language proficiency. Recruitment of bilingual and multilingual faculty and staff would also serve to benefit the linguistic needs of international students.

Technology can be a useful tool to support the transition of international students to the United States. Platforms such as Facebook™, Instagram™, SLACK, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and others can be utilized to create a sense of community and interconnectedness that may start upon admission to the program. Videos can serve as helpful resources to demonstrate the “how to’s” of daily life. Topics such as 1) how to secure affordable housing, 2) considerations for grocery shopping, 3) how to set up a bank account, and 4) how to utilize public transportation, may help to build skill development and a sense of familiarity in advance of a person’s arrival, thus potentially reducing the level of stress during the transition.

Implementation of key social and mentorship support for international students is imperative. Data from the current study indicate that a key entity (i.e., team or office) dedicated to supporting the needs of international students is essential for a successful transition and overall positive academic experience in the United States.

Instilling the understanding among faculty that international student perspectives are of great value will help to promote a sense of empowerment among international students. Faculty’s ability to encourage international students to utilize their voice in the classroom by inviting them to share their experiences will reinforce the notion that international perspectives are highly valued and important for our profession.

Given the array of challenges international graduates experience as they enter the United States workforce, occupational therapy graduate degree programs should consider how best to support their international alumni. Advocacy efforts are needed to modify systems and policies that create hurdles and/or victimize international practitioners seeking employment in the United States. Partnerships between the academic program and the clinical practice community could help to increase the number of employers who sponsor work visas. Training that is specific to the job search process, salary negotiations, and United States labor laws would be a beneficial support for international students and alumni.

Conclusion

Given this evidence, along with the profession of occupational therapy's desire to diversify their workforce in order to meet population needs globally (AOTA, 2019), it will be imperative for occupational therapy academic programs to take the necessary steps to ensure the needs of their international students are being met. There is a pressing need for educational programs to recognize and act on ways to holistically support international students as the profession continues to expand its reach globally. The profession of occupational therapy serves to benefit from the diverse perspectives and experiences of the international community. While the implementation of necessary support for international students may require substantial investment of time, finances, people, infrastructure, and systems to ensure an effective transition into occupational therapy programs and ultimately the profession's workforce, it is anticipated that the front-end investment will be well worth it. In doing so, the profession's capacity to address health needs globally will be strengthened.

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