

## **A Phenomenological Study of International Undergraduate Students from Ghana Experiences at Southern Illinois University Carbondale Illinois**

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### **Abstract**

*There is an increase in global student mobility as international students contribute to the dynamics of the American college classroom and population. American colleges have been welcoming international students because of the financial benefits and international fees. It is a serious problem that the academic and social needs of international students are not being met in American colleges. This study briefly examined the undergraduate international students from Ghana about their experiences at a Midwest University. Based on semi-structured interviews of six Ghanaian undergraduate international students, the qualitative research created an awareness of the social financial and academic experiences of international students at an American college. The researcher concluded that the types of experiences are varied among the participants, yet there was a high consistency of the themes: learning and studying, perception of faculty, expedited learning, online learning, language and communication issues financial, and a lack of social interaction with native students. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. The participants checked the transcripts for accuracy of the recorded data. The descriptive qualitative results and educational implications are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Culture, Social Experience, Academic Experience, International Students, Ghana, Financial, Immigrants, English Language Learners, Higher Education, Qualitative Research.

### **Introduction**

Culture can influence individual learning styles therefore differences exist in learning between individuals based on a cultural context. With that said, this literature review focuses on research significant to the international undergraduate student enrolled and attending American universities. The literature review indicates that cultural differences exist among international students, which influence learning styles. The main purpose of this study was to produce an overview of international students' experiences at Southern Illinois University as articulated via their own words. The knowledge drawn from this study should serve as useful reference information for current and future programs and for courses geared toward international students. Given the many challenges facing international students and the great benefits that they bring, this study aimed to explore the experiences of international undergraduate students from Ghana at SIU. Although there has been a substantial amount of literature about international students, most of the research has been focused on a particular aspect of international students such as advising relationships or mental health issues. The results of this current study should contribute to the pool of knowledge about international students at SIU by portraying a more holistic picture of the overall experience instead of just one aspect. Therefore, the literature review for this study include a wide range of topics such as international student enrollment, benefits of international students on campus, challenges faced by international students, adjustment, coping strategies, experience with staff and faculty, and interaction with local students. The social, political, and economic movement from the colonial period until today has greatly impacted higher education in America when it comes to curriculum, accessibility as well as type of institutions. There has been a shift to universal student access to higher education, including all students of diverse ethnic, socioeconomic, and religions (Cohen, 1998; Noftsinger & Newbold, 2007).

Additionally, more than three million students prefer to study abroad (Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Neimantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012; Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomas, 2010) and the number of international students enrolled in a United States institution of higher education increased by more than 6 % in 2012 (Marklein, 2013). Every international student in higher education undergoes acculturation process, which is due to migration or international study (Berry, 2005). Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomas (2010) found that 41% of 979 international students in Australia experience a considerable amount of stress, which is as a result of homesick, loneliness, cultural shock, adaptation to the host culture, or perceived discrimination. Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomas again stated that international student experience challenges, including but not limited to homesickness, lack of support both physical and financial, loneliness, and lack of meaningful relationships with the host nationals, language difficulties, and unfamiliar academic approaches.

### ***Background***

It is very interesting to know that global migration affects the individual and their community, and as globalization increases, so there is a need to continue to understand this complex experience and to examine the impact of acculturation on the overall health and well-being of the individual immigrant (Acculturation, 2015). Based on data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), new international student enrollment increased 6.5% in 2011-2012 from the previous year. There has been an increase in enrollment of international students over the past ten years; it increased from 547,867 international students in 2000-2001 to 764,495 in 2011-2012. In 2013, international student enrollment increased 13% from the previous year and currently in 2015, international student enrollment has increased to 16% (Institute of International Education, 2015). Southern Illinois University-Carbondale is no exception as the university saw its first enrollment increase in 10 years, in large part by exploding international enrollment. "We knew it was going to be good," Carla Coppi, Center for International Education director, said. "Never in our wildest dreams did we think it would be this good." Coppi was referring to the high increase in international student enrollment at SIU. The international student population increased by almost 25 percent to 1,817 students, accounting for more than 10 percent of the school's student body (Southern Illinois University - Institutional Research & Studies, 2016). Due to these huge increases, significant factors warrant attention in terms of international student's experiences in the areas of social, financial, academics among other things.

### ***Purpose of the Study***

The purpose of the study was to investigate the academic, financial and social experiences of students of international background from Ghana enrolled in Midwest University. The study utilized a qualitative approach with open-ended interview questions. This study will also provide administrators, faculty, and staff useful information for several purposes. Stakeholders will become better informed how to partner with international students to promote student success, strengthen connections, and build student self-confidence as well as add to existing literature.

### ***Significance of the study***

There is a growing problem of inadequate financial, social and academic support for international students in American universities. The purpose of this phenomenological research is to explore the financial, academic and social experiences of students of international background especially those from Ghana who are enrolled in Southern Illinois. It is important that universities in America find a better solution to cater for the needs of international students in a positive and healthy ways in order for them to be successful in accomplishing their educational goals.

### ***Methods***

#### **Participant Recruitment**

Since this research involved human subjects, approval was sought from the university institutional review board (IRB) intended to (a) seek permission from the board, (b) describe the project, (c) submit an informed consent form, and (d) have the project reviewed (Creswell, 2012). During the institutional review board process, the anonymity of participants was ensured by making sure their names would not be mentioned. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative sampling where researchers "intentionally select individuals to learn or understand the central phenomenon" (Creswell, 2012, p. 206). I therefore recruited the individual participants intentionally after a soccer game because I have met a lot of them who were interested in participating in the study.

## **Research Questions**

The following six research questions (RQ) served as the foundation for the inquiry in the current study: (RQ1) what are your experiences while attending Southern Illinois University? (RQ2) what is your academic experiences? (RQ3) what is your financial experiences? (RQ4) what is your social experiences? (RQ5) what are some barriers you face? (RQ6) what motivate you to attend Southern Illinois university?

## **Population and Data Sources**

The setting for the current research study was a Midwestern university. The population, in particular, was thus: individual who were from Ghana, and undergraduate students at a Midwestern university. In all, I interviewed 6(six) individuals, five males and two females who were identified and recruited using purposeful sampling. The interviews lasted between 30 and 40minutes and were conducted in order to (a) provide saturated data and (b) ensure diversity of opinion.

## **Interview Protocol**

### **Data collection procedures**

A semi-structured, open-ended interview format was chosen in order to collect data. The interviews were conducted face-face. The researcher designed an interview form. The interview protocol included designing a form that contained instructions for the process of the interview, the questions to be asked, possible probes for each question, and space to take notes on responses from the interviewee (Creswell, 2012). The interviews were digitally recorded, the transcriptions were color coded and common themes emerged from the data. The study used an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), an approach that allows participants to share stories, speak freely, and reflectively describe their experiences (Moustakas, 1994; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2012), the relationship between what happened and how the participants have come to understand the events, and finally to examine the commonalities among the international undergraduate students from Ghana (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013). The study provided a rich description of the experiences of international Ghanaian undergraduate student in Southern Illinois University.

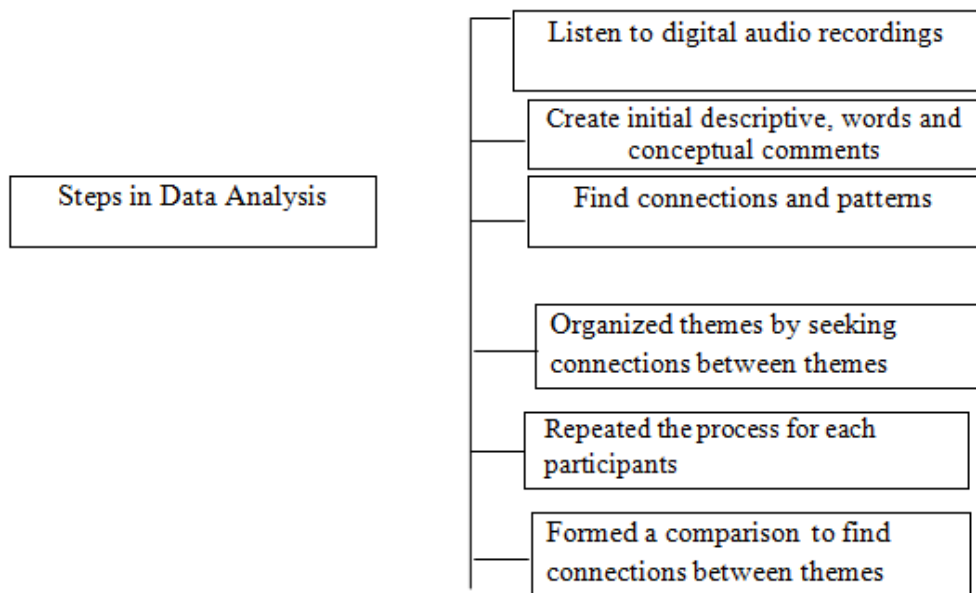
Regarding research question one (RQ1) the following interview questions were asked (n=6). Firstly, the researcher asked informants to describe their experiences while attending a Midwestern university. One follows up question was asked: did you have a good experience? The following questions were asked during interviews with participants (n=6) in order to provide an answer to research question two (RQ2): (1) what are your academic experiences; (2) can you say your academic experience is different from the one you had in Ghana? Regarding research question three (RQ3), the following questions were asked among the informants (n=6): (1) what is your financial experiences as an international student from Ghana? (2) have you received any financial aid from the school? Research question four (RQ4) was answered by having participants (n=6) provide an answer to the following question: (1) what is your social experiences at Southern Illinois University? Research question five (RQ5) was asked to participants (n=6): (1) what are some of the barriers you faced as an undergraduate international student from Ghana? Research question six (RQ6) was asked during the interviews process with participants (n=6) in the view of providing an answer to the following question; (1) what motivates you to attend Southern Illinois University?

## **Data Analysis**

### **Data analysis procedures**

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an approach used in phenomenology, which is the study of experiences (Smith, Flowers, &Larkin, 2012). I therefore completed six steps following the IPA guidelines established by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2012) to analyze and interpret the qualitative data. In step one; I listened to the digital recording while writing the transcript for the first time. The transcript was subsequently read many times to become acquainted with its contents to be able to extract patterns. In step two, I underlined important parts of the text, and created initial descriptive, words, and conceptual comments on the data. By looking at the words, lived experiences, and seeking abstract concepts, it garnered more interpretive analysis of patterns of meaning (Smith, Flowers, &Larkin, 2012)

In the third step, I used the transcript and initial notes to find connections and patterns by breaking the narrative eflow of the interview into fragments. The emerging themes captured the essence of the participant's experience. Step four involved organizing themes by seeking connections across the themes. Then typed the list of themes and formed map of related themes.



I have not used persuasion tactics or my position as a PhD student to elicit participation in this study and, participants could withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice. Respect and sensitivity to individuals being studied included but not limited to (a) informing participants of the purpose of the study, (b) not using deceptive means, (c) maintaining confidentiality, (d) using ethical interview practices, (e) sharing my role as a researcher (Creswell, 2012). According to Leedy and Ormrod (2001), bias is any influence, condition, or set of conditions that independently or together distort the data. The researcher remained firm and clear from other personal influences during the process and will remain the same thereafter. The following code-letters were used in order to identify participant. The first participant was identified with the following letters: IUSFG 1, second participants IUSFG 2, and the third participant IUSFG3, IUSFG4, IUSFG5, IUSFG6. (IUSFG= International undergraduate student from Ghana)

## **Findings**

### **Research Question One**

The purpose of research question one was to understand the experiences of undergraduate international students from Ghana while they continue to attend a Midwestern university. Based on interviews with six (6) people involved in the study, various themes emerged. First, all participants agreed that SIU is unique environment for academic success and they feel safe. Secondly, they have all agreed that they have encountered many students and faculty members who cannot understand them when they speak due to their ascent. Regarding the following question, all participants agreed that so far they have had good experiences except some minor negative experiences such as lack of help from some faculty members on assignments.

### **Research Question Two**

In the current study, research question two was developed as a means to understand participant's academic experiences. IUSFG 1 indicated that academic experience has been successful and that technological tools aided in English language acquisition. On the other hand, IUSFG 2, said the American education system uses busy work, which sometimes resulted long hours of study. Participant IUSFG3 explained, "When I first come here, I know nothing at all, I can't even find my way around but now, I know where everything." She registered for the college because she wants to earn a bachelor's degree in Economics from the university, which will provide greater opportunities in the future. She further explained that professors' explanations help students understand the content Speaking English is a problem, but speaking face-to-face with people is easier than using a phone.

IUSFG 4, indicated that he was lucky to attend a High school in the US prior to enrolling at SIU so he is used to the academic system in the American universities. IUSFG5, according to her, she faced a lot of problems due to lack of directions and wish faculties were more accepting in guiding students especially with the right courses to enroll in. Finally, IUSFG6 said he had difficulties in the first two semesters but adjusted quickly by seeking advices from both students and faculties that are willing to help him. In all, all six participants agreed that they have had difficulties accessing course work online and using computer at first.

### **Research Question Three**

The third research question was developed in order to understand the financial experiences of the participants (n=6) All the participants IUSFG1, IUSFG2, IUSFG 3, IUSFG4, IUSFG5 and IUSFG6 agreed that it has been difficult because as international student from another country not Ghana alone, you pay more in tuition than American students which make it difficult for them and they have to depend on family support for survival. IUSFG2 said “I wish I was born here” meaning he wishes he was an American because he thinks being American gives you more opportunities. On the follow up question, all participants agreed that they have not received any financial aid from the school because you have to be a permanent resident or a US citizen to qualify for financial aids. IUSFG 1 explained that even academic scholarships are very limited and to add to insult, they had to compete with American students for the limited scholarship available.

### **Research Question Four**

The fourth research question was developed as a mean to understand the overall social experiences of the participants (n=6). From the social perspective, all the six participants admitted that social life does exist on campus; however, IUSFG3 indicated that students interacted with those who share the same cultural background “especially African-Americans even though we are all blacks, they don’t even want to interact with someone from Africa”.

It has also emerged that all the six participants (n=6) experienced culture shocked for example, it is not common to see people kissing publicly in Ghana but here even on SIU campus people displayed public affection. Another point worth mentioned is that IUSFG3 said “He was shocked when someone asked him why you are eating with your fingers instead of using silverware?” All the three participants have also agreed that they have and continue to experience loneliness and sometime depression for the lack of social supports. They explained the importance of family dynamics and support. It is very difficult to talk to your family on regular basis as it is expensive to make international calls. The six participants agreed that there are few social clubs on campus that they could join to enjoy their social life but then cited school work as some of the problems for not having time to enroll in any social clubs. Overall, they have all agreed that they have had good experiences with social life as they continue to make friends and interact with them daily. IUSFG6 said, “I think social live at SIU is like every one for himself but God for us all”

### **Research Question Five**

The fifth research question seek to investigate and understand some of the barriers participants encounter while attending the university (n=6). The participants seem to have different experiences since each individual are different but one major theme that was common across all board is that they have all experienced discrimination from both students and faculty members at some point. Four out of the 6 participants indicated that they have even been call the “N-word” at one point by some group of students. Language and communication has also been mentioned among all six participants as a huge barrier. They (n=6) indicated that people have difficulty understanding them when they speak due to their ascent but they do understand others perfectly when they communicate to them. Another barrier that was identified has to do with homework and online learning process. IUSFG2 said he has a difficult time trying to do assignment since everything has to be typed. He compared educational system in Ghana to the one here as SIU “Back home everything is hand writing but here we have to type all out and I don’t have money to be printing papers since nothing is free at SIU”

### **Research Question Six**

The final research question was developed in order to understand the motivation behind the participants to continue to be a student at SIU despite the various problem they encountered (n=6). One common theme emerged from (n=6) all the participants. They have all said, brighter future and good job back home in Ghana. It was a common knowledge that an American degree will guarantee you a job when you get back home. It has been everyone’s dream to graduate with a degree from American university. IUSFG4, indicated and I “having a degree from America is like coming from heaven.

Everyone respect you, everyone listens to you and everyone want to give you a job so for me that is a huge motivation for me to work hard to obtain my degree and live like a king in Ghana”

### ***Discussion and Recommendations***

The findings revealed that international undergraduate students from Ghana faces a lot of difficulties ranging from financial, social, cultural, language as well as the use of technology in the Midwestern university. It will be beneficial to international students not those from Ghana alone but other students as well from various countries to be provided with financial assistant in the form of scholarship to lessen their financial burdens. As indicated by various literatures, it will be a good idea for schools to develop English programs for international students in order to help them integrated into the system. There should be more social events for them to educate them on cultural issues. The school should adopt a host parent system whereby international students will be linked to someone here to serve as a host parents to such student with that, I think students will feel less lonely as they have someone to call family and interact and be able to share their problems with them. One problem that the participants have mentioned over and over was the balance between face-to-face and online learning and the technological experiences. Therefore, my recommendation for future studies would be an exploration of the untraditional student and their experiences in online learning. This exploration should also include how faculty do or do not utilize technology in the classroom in all types of instruction. Graduate level is totally different from undergraduate levels. Example being face-to-face, blended, or fully online.

### ***Limitations and Delimitation***

Historically, phenomenology reports what and how participants have experienced a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Looking at just one school (SIU) is limited and does not reflect the entire population of international students. Secondly, the researcher only focused on particular international student specifically from Ghana. The researcher did not conduct a focus group nor conduct the interviews in the participants’ native languages. Responses might have been different had the researcher conducted a focus group or have the interview done in Ghanaian languages since people usually feel comfortable expressing themselves in their original local languages. Another limitation is that; the number of participants is very limited therefore generalizing the present study findings may not be possible. Delimitation to this study was time management of the study. A study of this magnitude requires time and energy to conduct but the researcher has only limited time. Because of the phenomenological approach, interviews were also time consuming based upon the duration of the interview and time necessary to extract lived experiences, complete transcriptions, and conduct member checking and coding.

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