



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Intercultural Relations

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijintrel

Predictors of undergraduate international student psychosocial adjustment to US universities: A systematic review from 2009-2018



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

International student
Undergraduate
Emotional adjustment
Social adjustment
Colleges and universities
United States

ABSTRACT

The most recent literature review of predictors of international student adjustment in institutions of higher education in the United States (U.S.) included studies from 1990 to 2009 (Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The current review was designed to understand the strengths and gaps of the literature on undergraduate international student adjustment to U.S. universities. Thirty quantitative studies reporting psychosocial outcomes for international undergraduate students at U.S. universities were identified. Acculturative stress, psychological adjustment, social belonging, depression, and anxiety were the most commonly researched outcomes. Recommendations are provided for extension of theoretical frameworks, next steps for researchers, and implications for students, faculty, and staff at U.S. universities.

In the 2016-17 academic year, over 439,000 undergraduate international students were enrolled in U.S. universities (IIE, 2017). Although the majority of international undergraduate students graduate from their institutions, many experience challenges adjusting to the new environment, including acculturative stress, depression, and lack of belonging (Glass, 2012; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wang et al., 2012). Not only are these psychosocial issues critical outcomes in and of themselves, but recent research also has illuminated the interlocking nature of international students' adjustment at U.S. universities with other outcomes including academic achievement, academic integration, and suicidal ideation (Han, Pistole, & Caldwell, 2017; Korobova & Starobin, 2015; Lowinger et al., 2016).

The needs of international undergraduate students have thus far outpaced the capacity of researchers to provide university faculty and staff with evidence-based practices and interventions to assist in their university transition and adjustment. Indeed, no intervention studies were included in the most recent systematic literature review of predictors of international student psychosocial adjustment to U.S. universities was conducted in 2011 (Zhang & Goodson, 2011), which included studies published between 1990 and 2009. Since 2009, U.S. university international undergraduate student enrollment has risen 63%, and the countries of origin have shifted dramatically, with China and Saudi Arabia each sending almost five times as many undergraduate students in 2017 as they did in 2009, displacing South Korea as the top country of origin for undergraduate international students at U.S. universities (IIE, 2009; IIE, 2017). These changing demographics as well as increased research attention on international students necessitates an updated literature review of predictors of international students' psychosocial adjustment outcomes, including both psychological and sociocultural adjustment. Following Ward and Kennedy (1999), psychological adjustment refers to psychological well-being (e.g., well-

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being, depression, anxiety), and sociocultural adjustment is defined as “the ability to ‘fit in’, to acquire culturally appropriate skills, and to negotiate interactive aspects of the host environment” (e.g., belonging, social support).

The current review is designed to meet this gap by providing a systematic literature review of studies including predictors of psychosocial outcomes of international students at U.S. universities. However, the current review deviates from Zhang and Goodson (2011) and other prior reviews by focusing on the adjustment outcomes of undergraduate international students. Recent research has illuminated differences in psychosocial outcomes for undergraduate and graduate students (Han et al., 2017; Kim & Ra, 2015; Li, Liu, Wei, & Lan, 2013). These findings align with life course theory in that relationships between predictors and psychosocial outcomes during times of transition are moderated by individuals’ age, social cohort, and life experience during those transitions (Elder & Shanahan, 2006). Research attention to international student adjustment has also increased in the past decade: an electronic search in April 2018 of *international student adjustment* on PsycINFO and Academic Search Premier yielded 744 peer reviewed articles from 2009-present compared to 237 from 1999-2008. Thus, the literature on international student adjustment has grown to the point where a literature review focused solely on undergraduate students is not only warranted by theory and recent empirical studies, but also feasible in terms of the number of studies published in the last decade having reached a critical mass.

Previous literature reviews

Five reviews of literature on international student adjustment have been published between 2011 and 2016 (de Araujo, 2011; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). The current review aligns closely with that of Zhang and Goodson (2011), as it focuses on predictors of international student psychosocial adjustment. The other reviews provide useful recommendations, but do not diminish the relevance of the current article as they either did not report findings separately for graduate and undergraduate students (Mesidor & Sly, 2016), had samples outside U.S. (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), focused solely on Chinese international students (Yan & Berliner, 2011), or did not include studies after 2010 (de Araujo, 2011). Below, we briefly detail the inclusion parameters of each review before integrating their findings.

Zhang and Goodson (2011) conducted an extensive review of studies published from 1990 to 2009 on psychological adjustment of international undergraduate and graduate students in the United States. Of the 64 studies they identified as containing data on psychological outcomes, 33 studies reported predictors of psychological well-being and 37 reported predictors of sociocultural adjustment. The review revealed that stress, social support, English language proficiency, region/country of origin, length of residence in the United States, acculturation, social interactions with Americans, self-efficacy, gender, and personality are the most reported predictors.

Mesidor and Sly (2016) completed a literature review of the factors contributing to the academic, cultural, social and psychological adjustments of international students. The review included a wide range studies published from 1968 to 2015 relating to cultural adjustment, social adaptation and academic adjustment, psychological adjustment and counseling utilization. Based on the literature, Mesidor and Sly concluded that international students’ early life experiences, resilience, self-efficacy, spiritual, social support, coping style, personality, emotional and cultural intelligence are critical features influencing their adjustment. Two reviews (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2011) were conducted to understand the range of motivations, acculturation trends and adjustment difficulties of international students. Yan and Berliner incorporated a broad range of studies on Chinese international students at U.S. universities, including four studies from 1981 to 1998 focused on psychosocial outcomes. These studies revealed that Chinese students’ motivation to study abroad is maximized by the government’s policy to send them to the United States for educational opportunities despite most students being unprepared for cultural adjustments. Smith and Khawaja (2011) identified 19 studies of sociocultural factors contributing to acculturation stress from 1989 to 2010 of international students in Western countries; however, many of the studies reviewed have samples containing international students at institutions in the United States. The authors grouped identified studies based on the stressors examined, including: linguistic, academic, sociocultural, discriminatory, and practical. After reviewing 21 articles concerning adjustment issues by international students attending U.S. universities and colleges published between 1991–2010, de Araujo (2011) found that English proficiency, social support, length of stay in the United States, perceived discrimination or prejudice, establishing relationships with Americans, and homesickness are the most significant factors relating to adjustment.

With regard to theory, Zhang and Goodson (2011) noted that most studies adopted psychological theories, with Ward and colleagues’ (Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999) adjustment framework the most utilized theory. Ward and colleagues posited that personality, social support, and transition stress are salient predictors of psychological adjustment, and that individuals’ intercultural communication and social skills are the main drivers of sociocultural adjustment. However, Zhang and Goodson noted that the evidence in the literature base did not align completely with Ward and Kennedy: rather than some factors predicting psychological adjustment (e.g., social support and personality) and other factors predicting sociocultural adjustment (e.g., social skills learning and language fluency), factors often predicted both psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

All five recent reviews recommended that future research be conducted to address under-investigated individual-level factors (e.g., individual characteristics and perceptions), while two included a focus on moderation and mediation between these factors and group level factors (Yan & Berliner, 2011; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Smith and Khawaja (2011) noted that social support and stronger social ties appear to have a protective effect on international students’ acculturative stress and issued a call for increased research on potential interventions to increase international students’ social ties and social support. de Araujo (2011) advocated for a focus understanding how the individual-level factor of language skills – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – might affect adjustment of international students. Last, de Araujo highlighted the scarcity of studies focusing solely on undergraduate international students as well as the sharp increases in undergraduate international students studying in the United States, increasing the impetus to

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