



Satisfaction with life and psychological symptoms among international students in Ghana and their correlates



David L. Sam^{a,c,*}, Docia K. Tetteh^b, Benjamin Amponsah^c

^a University of Bergen, Bergen, Norway

^b Koforidua Polytechnic, Koforidua, Ghana

^c University of Ghana, Legon-Accra, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to understand the adaptation of international students in Ghana focusing on correlates of satisfaction with life and psychological symptoms. The sample for the study was 151 international students, of which 97 originated from West Africa and 54 from Western countries, mostly from North America. Participants responded to a questionnaire with scales accessing satisfaction with life, psychological symptoms as outcomes and a number of psychosocial factors and academic related issues. Results indicated that on the, the students were satisfied with their life and had few psychological symptoms. However, students from West Africa reported poorer satisfaction with life, contrary to our expectations. Satisfaction with life and psychological symptoms were unrelated, and these two outcomes were predicted by different factors. Hierarchical multiple regressions indicated that our predictors could account for 30% of the explained variance in psychological symptoms and 42% in satisfaction with life. In spite of the fact that our participants were students, academic related factors did not contribute significantly to the students' psychological symptoms, except for academic strain which accounted for about 17% of the explain variance in satisfaction with life. Contrary to our expectation, English language proficiency was related to more psychological symptoms, and this relationship was partially mediated by perceived discrimination. The results are discussed in the light of general acculturation theory on sojourners within the Ghanaian cultural context.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Situating the problem

There is no gainsaying that having international students as part of the enrollment of universities and institutions of higher learning may be beneficial to all the parties involved. Not only do international students enrich higher education and strengthen relations with various countries in world trade, they also contribute to the promotion of global understanding (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Chirkov, Safdar, de Guzman, & Playford, 2008) and the financial base of universities through the fees that they pay (Greenaway & Haynes, 2000; Patterson, Romm, & Hill, 1998; Peterson, Briggs, Dreasher, Horner, &

* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychosocial Science, University of Bergen, Christiesgate 12, N-5015 Bergen, Norway.
E-mail address: david.sam@uib.no (D.L. Sam).

Nelson, 1999; Rolfe, 2002). Moreover, international students bring innovative research to the university (Chellaraj, Maskus, & Mattoo, 2008).

In spite of the benefits host nations and institutions derive from offering international education, African universities (with some few exceptions, e.g., Egypt and South Africa) have not been able to tap into these benefits. African universities are generally seen as unattractive destinations for international student exchange (UNESCO, 2015). Poor infrastructure has been identified as one major reason for Africa's poor position in recruiting international scholars (FitzGerald & Hodgson, 2001; Nsehe, 2012). Africa universities' unattractiveness is exacerbated by the high incidence of brain-drain on the continent (UNESCO, 2012). Not only are Africans among the largest group of students seeking higher education outside its continent, many fail to return. The drain of human capital from the continent, which undermines sustainable development is of major concern. However, escalating tuition cost in many western countries, lower tuition fee in Africa, and the lower cost of living on the continent are beginning to work in Africa's favor. In recent years, Foundations such as, Carnegie Corporation of New York have made substantial financial contributions to a number of African Universities (including the University of Ghana) all aimed at strengthening the programs African Universities offer (see Kapur, 2003). And, with UNESCO's increasing effort to improve the infrastructure of African universities, not only are Western countries beginning to send their students to African countries, (ICEF Monitor, 2013; IIE's Open Doors Report, 2011); African countries have also been sending their students to other African universities. Moreover, Western countries are entering into international bilateral agreements with African universities in order to ease transfer of course credits across national borders, reduce the students' tuition fees and offer their students more course options and electives (see Tufts, 2014; Wachter, 2004). To ensure quality education, universities are also setting up satellite offices and campuses in African countries. The New York University, USA and Lancaster University, UK for instance, both established campuses in Accra, the capital of Ghana in 2013 (see Lancaster-Ghana, 2013; NYU-Accra, 2013).

Notwithstanding these benefits, the success of international student education and its sustenance depend in part on the satisfaction of the international students, on whether they are thriving at an African university. As international student numbers rise, and students sojourn in more diverse cultures, the need to understand their adaptation in these new and diverse countries is warranted. Our goal in this study was to understand the psychological adaptation of international students in Ghana, and the factors that may account for the students' adaptation. The study looks specifically at international students from West Africa and Western countries.

1.2. Ghana as a host country for international students

Ghana is a sovereign state in West Africa and was a British colony before gaining its independence in 1957. Ghana was the first African nation to declare independence from European colonization. Ghana is also a multi-ethnic society, and each ethnic group has its own language. While some of the languages (e.g., Fanti and Twi) could be said to be dialects of the larger Akan language, some of the ethnic languages are so different from each other to the extent that English, the official language of the country, serves as the best medium of communication in many settings.

Ghana, just like other sub-Saharan African countries is high on the cultural value of embeddedness and low on autonomy (Schwartz, 2006). These cultural values suggest that Ghanaians find meaning in life through social relationships, prioritize protecting group solidarity and tradition rather than cultivate or emphasize individual uniqueness (i.e., autonomy). These value orientations are in contrast to the cultural values that characterize much of the Western world, where there is emphasis on autonomy and harmony (i.e., cultural values that emphasize fitting into the world as it is; living in a peaceful world, being in unity with nature, and protecting the environment); and to some extent mastery (i.e., cultural values of active self-assertion to master, direct, and change the natural and social environment in order to attain group or personal goals). What these different value orientations mean is that international students from Western countries to Africa, and in this case, Ghana, will meet unfamiliar cultural values.

In addition, as a low-income country, the Ghanaian infrastructure for higher education is relatively poor compared to many Western countries. For instance, and anecdotally, the present norm for students in many western countries is to submit course assignments online; this is however, almost non-existent at nearly all the universities in Ghana. Submitting assignment in hardcopy is the rule; and with the country's frequent power failures, printing assignments in hardcopy and submitting them on time can be a challenge. Not only does poor internet connection limit the accessibility of e-journals and online materials; the country's poor economy also restricts students to only open access journals and makes only the abstracts of many high impact journals accessible. Student-faculty ratio in Ghana is quite high resulting in poor quality student supervision. Based on Ghana's poor infrastructure, high student-faculty ratio, it is reasonable to assume that the country is not very attractive to international students, particularly students from Western countries. Yet, international student statistics indicate that their numbers are on the rise (UG, 2012a,b, 2015). How is this possible? Could it be that in spite of the country's poor infrastructure and economy, international students actually thrive well?

1.3. Adjustment of international students

International students are both foreigners (by virtue of their international background) and students. As such, they are confronted with the typical challenges young people and university students encounter irrespective of national background. These include the stresses of higher education where students are expected to go through large amounts of complex study-

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