



INTERNATIONAL STUDENT NEEDS: EXPERIENCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR DESIGN AND CONTENT OF AN ONLINE PLATFORM

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Abstract:

This study was conducted with graduate students from eight different countries who study at College of Education at a public university in United States to guide the design and structure of an online platform. For this purpose, the challenges and difficulties that international students face, their coping strategies, and suggestions were investigated. Majority of the participants embraced the idea of having a platform, Moodle site, available just for the international students in the college for building a community to communicate around similar needs and interests. Most reported concepts that they would like to see in the Moodle are career development, financial resources, and academic conferences related to their field.

Keywords: internationalization, mobile student, coping strategies, international student needs, online platform

1. Introduction

Mobility and internationalization of higher education is a field getting more attention around the globe after the tremendous increase of the number of students who travel abroad for educational purposes. In a report of *Project Atlas*[®]; Bhandari, Belyavina and Gutierrez (2011) provides the standard definition of *mobile students* that is accepted by *Project Atlas*[®] partners as:

“Students who undertake all or part of their higher education experience in a country other than their home country OR students who travel across a national boundary to a country other than their home country to undertake all or part of their higher education experience.”

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As a result of the eagerness of students and scholars to travel abroad to get the best higher education in best institutions (Bhandari and Blumenthal, 2011), one of the effects of globalization is the increased number of international students in colleges (Madge, Raghuram, & Noxolo, 2015; Nieto and Booth, 2010). Bhandari and Blumanthal (2011) reports that international student enrollment, students who study outside their own country, increased 65 percent since 2000. During those years, the context of global mobility has also changed in terms of host and sending countries, the internationalization strategies that different countries put into play, joint research programs, and so on.

Students who study overseas face several challenges during their social and academic transition to their new environment (Jones, 2017; Lacina, 2002; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Watson, 2013). These challenges could be not only as a result of demanding Higher Education environment, but also some additional factors can affect student adjustment during their acculturation process, like unfamiliarity with the customs and values of the home country, confronting with a different academic culture, acculturative stress and so on. This study is a needs assessment to design an online platform for international students in an education college. Through the interviews, it aims to identify international students' needs and suggestions at first hand.

2. Literature Review

Several studies report that international students usually face many challenges as a result of studying in a foreign country (e.g. Jones, 2017; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Watson, 2013). During this period, they may experience acculturative stress and problems about their adjustment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Acculturative stress is the stress that individuals or groups have during their acculturation process. Acculturation is defined as a change in the *culture* of a group or change in the *psychology* of an individual when two or more cultural groups and their individual members have first-hand contact (Berry, 1997; Berry, 2006). Smith and Khawaja (2011) identify common possible acculturative stressors for international students as language, educational stressors, sociocultural stressors, discrimination, and practical stressors.

Language ability is identified among the main reasons for stress of international students and the biggest barrier to adjustment during their study (Brown, 2008). Brown (2008) claim that students experience intense stress at the beginning of the academic program and it declines over time. One of the reasons is that they aim to achieve an educational qualification, so that they are expected to be linguistically and academically competent in a short period of time after their arrival in the host country.

According to Chen and Ullen (2011), international students have unique challenges during their academic work and may experience culture shock due to the differences in instructional methods, assignments, and writing requirements between their home country and current institution. For higher education in Western universities, the workload is typically high, and students additionally trying to adjust to a new academic culture (Brown, 2008). Sometimes, there are significant differences

between the students' origin country and the host country in terms of academic requirements and expectations, especially countries that majority of international students come from to study in Western countries (Brown, 2008; Hayes & Introna, 2005). In some countries classes mostly use a single textbook and the educational system emphasizes memorization of texts, which makes students' adjustment harder. For example, Handa and Fallon (2006) reported academic writing, critical thinking and analysis, and referencing skills as the most challenging skills for the graduate students. Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day (2009) stated that large majority of the participants of their study were worried about failing exams and essays.

In addition to the language and educational stressors, sociocultural stressors are also determined among the influential factors on international students' intercultural experiences (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2009; Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Loneliness is also reported among the commonly observed problems for international students especially in the first months of their stay in the host country (McLachlan & Justice, 2009; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). Students need to establish a social network in the host country, since they left their family and friends in their countries (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). Yangyi (2009) reports not making friends as one of the main fears of international students through their transition to higher education institutions in the U.S. Ten out of fifteen student participants of this study reported making friends as one of the most challenging factors in their transition. According to Leask (2009), language skills influence the connection between home and international students. Specific features of the learning environment and interaction opportunities that are available inside and outside of the classroom are reported among the other factors that impact both the quality and quantity of contact between home and international students (Leask, 2009).

Additionally, several other factors are listed among the challenges to international students. For example, Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day (2009) reported majority of the international students who participated in their study had financial worries. Accommodation, food, and transportation are some other practical stressors for international students. Preparation of international students for academic, social and everyday life in the host country have been concerns for many institutions, and there has been some documentation for issues related to transition of international students in the host country (Watson, 2013). Higher Education Institutions have also been using social networking services to promote their institution and to provide opportunities to prospective students to get answers for their possible questions. However, students need to make significant effort to reach those resources and reach the resources and answers that they search for. Gu and Schweisfurth (2006) concluded that although they face multiple challenges and experience struggles, majority of the international students manage to successfully continue their life and education; and they change and develop during this process. However, it is important to learn from those student experiences to design more supportive environments for future students. Our current study started with the idea to generate a university-based platform to serve international student as a place where they can reach resources, connect, and communicate with other

international students who are educated at the same institution, particularly College of Education. We decided to use Moodle as the hosting platform. However, when we start to put resources together it was seen that a deep data collection would be needed to decide what students actually need not only in general also including their needs related to their field of study. In addition to a comprehensive literature review, we directly asked questions to current international students at the college through the face-to-face interviews and by email. In this regard, this study investigates challenges that were faced by international students and how they dealt with those challenges. Then student suggestions for improvement of international student experience in current institution based on their experiences are presented.

2.1. Research Context

At the university in which this current study has been conducted, the office called International and Distance Education Alliance (IDEA) was formed to improve internationalization in College of Education (CED). The office had been coordinating several international programs such as study abroad programs, faculty development, and programs for international students. IDEA office was supporting international students in CED by conducting research and organizing activities for the students and faculty in the college. This current study had started as a part of affords of the IDEA office to improve internationalization in the college. We were planning to offer international students in CED an online platform where they can reach resources and search for information they need. After some discussions, we decided to use Moodle as the hosting platform. A comprehensive literature review and face-to-face interviews with international students in the college were conducted to learn first-hand information about what students actually need in the platform. In this regard, this study investigates international students` experience during their study in CED, challenges that they faced, how they dealt with those challenges and their suggestions for improvement of experience of internationals in current institution.

2.2. Purpose of the Study and the Research Questions

This study is a part of a larger study. The purpose of the larger study was to conduct a 'needs assessment' for the College of Education (CED) to determine how the college can become more multicultural and international in focus. Through this process, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the faculty and international students in the college. In this study, the data from the student interviews are presented searching the answers for the following questions:

- Which type of challenges and difficulties do international students face during their study abroad? What helped them to cope with the challenges they faced?
- What suggestions do students have for an online platform for international students? And, what are their suggestions for the college in general?

3. Method

3.1. Study Design and Participants

This study uses qualitative case study method. It aims to investigate international student experiences deeply based on their own voices. The case examined in this study is graduate international students in College of Education in a public university in United States. Participants are fourteen students from eight different countries. During the study, total number of international graduate students in the college was twenty-two. Participation was voluntary-based. For confidentiality, students were coded with letters. Table 1 presents student coded names along with the information of which country they are from and how long they have been in the U.S.

Table 1: Participants of the Study

| | Country | # of years in U.S. |
|-----------|----------------|--------------------|
| Student A | China | 5 |
| Student E | China | 1.5 |
| Student H | China | 1 |
| Student J | China | 3 months |
| Student L | China | one semester |
| Student M | Honduras | 4.5 |
| Student B | Turkey | one semester |
| Student K | Turkey | 4 |
| Student G | Taiwan | one semester |
| Student I | Taiwan | 1.5 |
| Student C | Czech Republic | one semester |
| Student F | Malaysia | 4 |
| Student N | Sweden | 6 |
| Student P | UK | 4-5 months |

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

The data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Each interview took 15-30 minutes. Before the face-to-face interviews, an e-mail was sent to all of the international students in CED and they were requested to participate in the study. If the student replied the e-mail positively, time was scheduled for the interview. Participants were informed about the study more in detail at the beginning of the interview. Then they were asked questions about their experiences as an international student. Some demographic questions such as which country they were from and for how long they had been in U.S., questions about the challenges they had, their coping strategies with the problems, and questions about the university website and the Moodle for international students are included in the interview.

The data was analyzed with open coding. To organize the data, selected quotes were recorded in an Excel sheet under themes that were written based on the interview questions. Then interview records were listened several times to decide the final codes. For the writing process, each quote under each theme was read again and some of them were selected and reported in the findings section of this study.

4. Findings

4.1. Challenges and Difficulties

4.1.1. Language Barrier

Twelve students out of fifteen students who participated in this study reported language difficulties as the most challenging factor for them especially in their first semester in the host country. Students mentioned language barrier could be a problem in many aspects of their lives such as shopping and making friends during their stay in the host country. More importantly, since they are in the United States with the purpose of achieving an educational goal in a short period of time, the most important impact was on their academic lives. Class assignments require students to have high levels of reading and writing skills. Students were also challenged by the intensity of the assignments as stated below:

“Obviously, the main difference is the language. Trying to navigate the reading portion, the presentation portion, expression of talking in a different language; so it is challenging... In our department, they usually assign us readings and you need to understand what you read well. Sometimes even understanding the abstract is really hard.” (Student B)

“All the tasks, all the assignments are a big challenge for me. I have problems to handle everything. Everything takes a way longer for me. I read one article on one day, but people are able to read like four articles a day. This is a problem along with writing. I cannot just sit down and write, it is impossible for me. As soon as I write something down I have to double check, think about the grammar, the syntax.” (Student C)

From the following comment by the only student whose native language was English, we can say that language barrier could be a challenging factor even for native speakers of English:

“When I first came one of the biggest things was language. I spoke pretty good English, but I had pretty thick accent. So, people like what you are saying?” (Student N)

In the college that this study was conducted, several classes are delivered online. Some of those classes are mandatory and some of them are elective. During those classes, students are assigned some readings, participate or organize discussion forums, and so on. For those classes, a certain number of class sessions could be on a synchronous. Students have to express their ideas during those discussions mostly in audio form. One of the students is explaining the difficulty of communicating with people through an online platform for a new international student:

“I had a huge difficulty in my first semester. I also took an online class. That was the first time for me to take a totally online class. If I talk to the person face-to-face, I can

understand their body language...After those two years, I knew how to study..., so yes I survived." (Student A)

4.1.2. Educational (Academic) challenges and system differences.

Some of the participants of this study reported the system differences between the homeland and the host country as being one of the most challenging factors in their academic transition, as expressed below:

"U.S. educational system is quite different than China; or where I used to live in Australia. They have a lot of work to do, a lot of reading, a lot of assignments. Sometimes I have to write every week for essay. That can be really stressful at the beginning, because you know I am studying in College of Education, so it is all about the language; writing, the quality of the writing. I used to teach math, and science; so we do not really work on words, we do not really write a lot as a teacher or as student." (Student E)

Most reported differences between the U.S. and students' homeland were having too many assignments, especially requiring them to read and write most of the time. They usually agree with that this is a requirement of studying in a social field. The student whose native language was English also explained that he did not have too much problems about the language, but he emphasized the more work load in U.S. Another most reported difference was the class discussions and presentations. Students from different countries mentioned that class discussions and presentations are not very common in the education system in their countries.

4.1.3. Social life/ making friends, Homesickness, Loneliness

All of students in this study were graduate students and as stated in earlier sections their academic life was very intense and challenging. Most of them reported that because of the intensity of the courses, they do not have much time for socialization. Addition to the time concern, students also mentioned not knowing the nature of the friendship in the host country and language barriers as challenging for them. Student J says:

"The social life has a big part on there (in the transition process). I am not really social, because... like talking to a native...I will be very cautious; because I do not want to say something that offend them."

Students also mentioned that making friends from other international students was easier than making friends from the native students. Some students were also meeting with students from the same country or countries that have a more similar culture sometimes. Otherwise, they mostly meet people from the same department or people who they meet for some sport activities, like people who they play soccer, since it was more convenient. They feel less confident to communicate and making friends with Americans. Student L says:

"I have difficulty, like low-confident to make American friends. In college of education more students are American than internationals (when it is) compared to like engineering. It is hard to reach."

Students also reported that almost all of their American class-mates are part time adult students, which was making friends even harder for internationals:

"I always wish that I had more friends in my class. I have nice class-mates, but they are adult students. When they are adult students, they have work and family outside of the class, so I cannot hang out with them a lot other than for class work. When I was having my degree in my home town, I had friends to hang out even to talk about assignments over a coffee or something." (Student F)

Homesickness was not reported commonly by participants. Even if this may be a result of several factors, one students' comment was interesting. She said she had been different parts of the world for short term, but it was the first time she separated from her family for a long period of time. This imply it is also important that when international students travel abroad for educational purposes, the time period is getting longer, which may affect them differently than short term study abroad programs.

Although many participants reported they did not have a lot friends, and they also usually did not even have time to make friends. Only a couple of students had positive social experience. One of them came to the U.S. with a scholarship for a sport activity. Since he was training people, he had a lot of friends and spending more time with Americans. The other student was from Europe and in the same program with a friend from another part of Europe, and they also stay in the same place. So that they could attend social events together and share many experiences. And, one more student mentioned that even if he had some difficulties and felt lonely at first, in time, he started to make more friends from his class-mates; and he had an American roommate, he was helping him for socialization.

4.1.4. Practical Challenges (Transportation, food, housing, etc.)

Transportation was reported as one of the restrictions for socialization by some of the students. Many students also talked about transportation issues affecting many aspects of their transition to life. Usually, they had hard time due to their experience in their home country was different than the circumstances that they were living in by the time. Most of the students reported that they very appreciate for the school transportation. On the other hand, several students reported that without having a car it was not convenient to go to places; and it was even hard to go to classes because of the schedules. Student E said:

"Transportation is always an issue, if you live very far from the campus, if the school transportation does not really go to your place. My classes are graduate classes. Start

around 4 and finish around 10 sometimes. It is not really safe to walk home from the bus stop."

Student F also talked about a similar problem, especially in the winter she had hard time. Since she had to be outside alone and relying on buses for shopping and going back to home. She mentioned one time it was fall break and she had a class Wednesday and the break was starting on Thursday, and the class was until 10 pm o'clock. She did not know that the bus was not running in the evening. So, she finished her class at 10 o'clock and realized that there were no buses. She continued:

"How do I go back? It was really dark, so that kind of upset me a little bit. These are some things I should have been aware of. Eventually I just realized that if I have asked one of my class-mates to help me they would... I was not living too far, just two miles away from campus. ...It is just that I was not used to ask people, because I was so independent back in my home country, so I did not realize I did need help in that sense."

In terms of other practical problems, like food and accommodation, students had a variety of different experiences. Some of the exemplar student comments for food and housing are given below:

"The food is different. I was eating in the cafeteria. It was different than the Chinese food. It is a changing process...After these several years in the U.S. I am quite comfortable with the western food, but I still spend a lot of time eating Chinese food." (Student A)

"That is a big problem. I did not have such problems with nutrition neither in Finland or in South Korea, especially South Korea is a completely different cousin...I do not like fast food. I cook a lot, almost everyday... Buy stuff the groceries and cook our food."
(Student C)

"Housing is always a problem. I think, all the stories that I hear from my peers and myself as well. Trying to find the right place, trying to find a cheap place, trying to find a close enough place..." (Student M)

Other than the headlines above, a couple of students talked about additional challenges for them. One of them talked about the discrimination she faced not in the current institute, where she received her master's. And, another student mentioned about cultural differences not only between home country and the U.S., but also the differences among different parts within the U.S.

4.2. What helped to cope with the challenges?

4.2.1. Working for a program in the school

Some of the participants had some official connections with the university other than being a student. They were working a part of university offices such as International

and Distance Education Alliance (IDEA) and Intensive English Program. They were supervising international students or teaching classes to the international students through these programs. Those experiences helped them a lot to adjust to the new culture and new system. Their comments about how their experience helped them are given below:

"I have helped for student teachers in China help them with the culture, and language, and for some routine work. That makes me connect with the university, I can involve in the university activities." (Student A)

"I am a TA that is a really good experience, because I work in Intensive English Program which recruit a lot of Chinese students here. I think they needed someone with Chinese mindset, to come up with a good study skill or judgement skills for Chinese students... I also got a lot of support from my job...Americans in the company, they are really willing to contact with Chinese people, they are willing to help a foreigner...Chinese people in the company, they have long time connection with Americans already, so they know what kind of struggle you would face, so they will give you help. That is my social support."
(Student L)

4.2.2. Having friend from the same country

Several participants reported that having friends from the same country was very helpful to solve many problems that they have had. For example, one student mentioned there were only two students from her country in the college when she began her study, then more people came and they formed a small community. In time, she made some friends not only from her country, but also from other countries, which supported her a lot.

"I met with a couple of friends. They took me to the rental office to see if there are any houses available." (Student E)

"I think the things get really better when I made friends from those Chinese students here. I know the way, they tell me in the native language what we should do, how the things go here. I had a senior who already graduated from here, once we took a course together, he helped me a lot for those things (class work, assignments). He gets familiar with the whole procedure faster than I did, so he told me what I should do for certain questions, while doing group discussion or doing a project. We did a project together and he helped me a lot." (Student H)

4.2.3. Participating in activities for international students/ helping other international students

Participants talked about how Office of International Students (OIS) supported them even before coming to the U.S. by sending them documents, and informing them about things that they need to do before coming to the U.S. and during their study. A couple

of the participants reported that the activities that were organized by OIS for international students were also helpful especially at the beginning of their study, like welcome parties. They also had opportunity for socialization via the volunteer works though the OIS activities. Student A:

“When you involve in these activities, it is not like I am an outsider I am just transforming from outsider to insider in this culture. I have been accepted by my class mates, by the students.”

4.2.4. Other

Students also reported that they received so much help from their advisors. Advisors helped them for housing, going to markets, getting furniture. Students were also helped by other students such as their roommates:

“Always talk with my advisor. My advisor is always busy, but if I would like to talk to him schedule a time with him. Every time that I met with my advisor, I got a good help.”
(Student A)

“My roommate, she has been here longer than me, so she provides a lot of suggestions and assistance to me. She helps about the language, the rules of the classroom, the culture.” (Student I)

Sometimes they learned dealing with problems in time:

“The differences in the system: For example, the syllabus. Before I come here I have not seen any syllabus. I did not know how to use the syllabus. After the two semesters, I have learned that it was very very important for you to read the syllabus, understand what the requirements are, what the assessment is. Also, how to manage your time. You do not feel really busy at the beginning of the semester, but end of semester it is crazy busy...So, yes that was different how I study in China, so I just need time to get familiar with the curriculum, with the instructions, the assessment, how the teacher give your scores, what are the key points, the objectives of the class. When you understand this, you start to learn. It took me a while to learn how the system is running.” (Student A)

Some other exemplar comments are given below:

“Maybe the biggest factor is myself, because I feel that I have changed in the meantime. I am more open now, I can speak up.” (Student K)

“Here is much better than it was before for me. I have more friends that I am really closed to, we are going through the same things at the same time, so it has been really helpful.”
(Student M)

I think, the support system is pretty good, if you know where to look. (Student N)

4.3. Use of University Resources

The last part of the interviews was about students' experiences and thoughts about the university and CED website, and what they would prefer to have in the Moodle site that we plan to prepare for international students in CED based on their experiences with other resources. Below, first student opinions, thoughts, and experiences with the university and CED websites are given, then their suggestions for Moodle are presented.

4.3.1. University Website

For using the university website, student comments were mixed. Student usually mentioned they visited the university website during their application process. The website was like the face of the university. While the website was very satisfying for some of them, it was confusing for others. Student J and K reported that they mostly visit CED website and do not visit the university website much. Student C talked about he was used to a different webpage design, but getting used to the new one. He had some hard time to find the requirements and complete his application. Two exemplar comments are:

"I like the university website very much. Before I come here I did the application. I go to academic, search different departments, yes it worked very well... Especially the library website was really helpful, search papers online, finding thesis and dissertations."

(Student A)

"It took me a while to get familiar with the website. I am sure the information I need is somewhere there, but I need to figure out a way to find it. Sometimes it really depends on the key words you put in." (Student E)

Student M said that she checked the university website before coming. She felt things were not connected well and several things to deal with, it was overwhelming. Student N said It is good, he found everything he looked for. Just a lot of paper work for international students. Student A mentioned that her roommates helped her for starting to use things first. She had a different approach for using the website, she said:

"First go to friends or website to learn something. I think it depends on the personality. One of my roommates she is doing all the stuff by herself. She feels comfortable to see what exactly said online. My type is I like to ask other students. They show me, I am a visual learner. They show me, and I practice ones and I can remember that, I feel more comfortable. (Student A)

Students visit the university website for application documents, tuition information, library resources, personal student account, OIS activities, calendar and

supporting activities. For instance, Student A reached information about the academic workshops through the university website, and found those workshops very helpful to learn giving reference and searching academic papers. Sometimes they visited the website for housing and other needs. Student J reported that she learned housing information through the Chinese student association; she also mentioned that she found the information about the association through the university website.

4.3.2. CED Website

Majority of the participants reported that they visit general university website more frequently than the CED website, but still they check CED website for some specific information. Usually they learn about the programs, professors and courses from the CED website. For Student H and Student N, the content of the CED website was adequate and the website was easy to use and very detailed. However, Student I, J, and P said that even if they could reach general information about the courses and professors, they would prefer to reach more details. Student K also mentioned finding information about the courses was a little hard for her. Similarly, Student L said that she would prefer to reach more detailed information about the professors, their research, grants, and publications. Even if the content was adequate for some extension, design was not that attractive. For Student M, the design was overwhelming, too. Especially the webpage that is designed for international students was hard to realize and reach. Student B and Student M mentioned that they would prefer to have a direct link to the Moodle that we plan to prepare for CED international students and to the IDEA (International and Distance Education Alliance) webpage.

4.3.3. Suggestions for Moodle

After talking about the university and CED websites, which information they find in those, and what they should see more, I asked participants what they would prefer to have in the Moodle site that we were planning to prepare for CED international students. The most reported concept that they would like to see in Moodle is career development information especially for internationals. Exemplar comments about it are given below:

"I am looking for jobs right now, so I may need the information about the schools around here... New students maybe interested in possible volunteer experience to get some practice teaching and working with students in schools...I would like to have some information about what are the jobs here." (Student H)

"As international students, we pursue our degrees. The reason why we pursue our degrees is we want to get a good job. If you can put some information about how we can be successful in the workplace as an international student to do that. The activity options in the university, like which type of activities we can attend to improve ourselves academically." (Student I)

“You can give some examples of international students who work here, their experience about how to do that. The process of finding the job, application process, being successful in the job. I really want to listen somebody to share her/his experience about how to be successful in this area, academic in their life. Maybe they have more experience and know our needs better, since they overcame that.” (Student J)

The other featured concepts that they mentioned prefer having in Moodle are financial resources, education conferences, detailed information about the programs and the courses, help for daily life such as resources about apartments and cars, and American culture. One of the reasons for having a site specific to CED internationals was providing them a platform through which they could make connections and learn from each other. When we talk about these with Student B, he had some concerns. According to him, an expert from each department is needed to able to give information specific to departments. He has concerns about how often people will visit the Moodle, they do not have a lot of internationals in his department. Student E and L had a different perspective. Student E said:

“If every international student will have access to that, it is a great thing for them. They can connect with other people then. I do not know a lot of international students, because we do not have classes together, we may be in different programs, and our schedules could be different...This could be a place where people get connected.”

4.4. Student suggestions for an improved international experience

In the last part of the interviews, we asked international students about their suggestions to improve internationals' experience in the college and at the university in general. Student comments change around two big concepts: academic and social aspects of their life.

4.4.1. Academic

Students talked about their need for support in their academic life especially in terms of academic writing and speaking in English. Some students suggested to have a writing center at the university from which international students could get help for their academic writing. Another difficulty that they mostly talked about was planning their studies and timing. Some of them were confused about which classes they will take during their whole study and some of them were worried about when to start working on their thesis, when to submit the plan of the work, etc. Student A mentioned some colleges had a student handbook that talks about these types of details, which she wished to have during her study in CED.

4.4.2. Social

Participants talked about the social activities and gathering with natives and other internationals being very important and helpful for their adjustment. Although most of the participants were participating in the activities that were organized by OIS, most of

them mentioned there should be more. Additionally, participants of this study who are a part CED mentioned they would prefer to have more social gathering in the college including gatherings with the faculty. For example, Student A said: *Let students know faculty and the college care about them.* This was really important for international students. Two exemplar comments are given below:

"In the university that I have been previously, they were always together, every two weeks or three weeks they had a gathering. We were doing different activities together. Sometimes we went ice-skating, sometimes they had a picnic. They were making me feel like a family." (Student B)

"I think, having a peer-mentor can be really interesting. If I can be matched up with one senior, who is in her/his second year and in the same program. It is not only the social support; but also, academic support." (Student L)

5. Discussion

The number of international students is increasing at universities in different countries, but students may experience various challenges during their social and academic adjustment to the environment of the host countries (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Lacina, 2002; Brown, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Watson, 2013). Participants of this study are graduate students in College of Education at a southeastern public university. They are from different departments of the college and their stay time in U.S. varies. Some of the common challenges to students are reported as language, educational, sociocultural, discrimination and practical problems (Leask, 2009; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Taylor, 2011; Yan & Berliner, 2009; Watson, 2013). The findings of this study presents that language barrier is one of the main reasons for any other difficulties for most of the international students. On the other hand, differences between their home country and the host country in the academic life, classes and expectations have another big portion of the difficulties that students experience. Most of the participants mentioned they had problems in their social life especially with their American peers, while most of them also had difficulties in daily life.

Smith & Khawaja (2011) reported language barrier as being one of the major acculturation stressors for many international students. Students in this study also reported the language barrier as the most challenging factor in their transition. While some of the participants of this study reported educational system differences also mentioned in student comments, the main difficulty is perceived as their English proficiency. Earlier research also reported that language barriers can affect academic tasks such as assignment writing and participation in classes (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). According to Brown (2008), all students are challenged by the demands of Higher Education, especially for the writing portion, including non-traditional students. However, international students are under more pressure, since they need to become linguistically competent quite quickly.

Brown (2008) reports 'the confronting a new environment with an alien academic culture' is another reason for the extra pressure on international students. For example, according to Yan & Berliner, (2009) Chinese students feel various academic stressors, while studying at U.S. colleges ranging from expectation of academic excellence that has strong cultural roots to differences in the classroom environment. In this study, it was shown that students not only experience communication difficulties, they also need special help especially for academic writing. Participants from different countries such as U.K., Turkey, China all posited that they think classes they take in the college have really high reading and writing expectations. They need to spend twice or more time to complete some of the assignments than their peers. Majority of the participants agree with that they develop in time. So, we may say it is not necessarily about their level of proficiency, it is also related to coming from another academic culture and not being aware of what to expect in their new academic environment. Thus, many of them were really grateful when the professor provides clear instructions and let them know about her/his expectations for the class assignments from the beginning. Almost all of the participants would appreciate having a writing center that would help for their academic writing especially for their early years in the college.

As stated by Smith and Khawaja (2011), international students leave their families and friends back home and they need to establish a new social network in the host country. Yangyi (2009) reports not making friends as one of the main fears of international students through their transition to higher education institutions in the U.S. Yan & Berliner (2009) add that a lot of Chinese students also have ineffective interactions with faculty members, which directly affects their academic lives. Ten out of fifteen student participants of this study reported making friends as one of most challenging factors in their transition. Majority of the participant either have more friends who are from the same nationality with them or other international students and most of them have no or very few American friends. From the internationalization perspective, *international students are valuable contributors of diverse cultural perspectives and experiences, who have the potential to transform the campus and the classroom into a vibrant microcosm of the world* (Leask, 2009). However, Leask (2009) argues that this potential has not been recognized enough and add that simply bringing home and international students together in a class does not guarantee meaningful interactions. Participants of this study also mentioned the same experience. Some of them suggested more social activities that brings home students and faculty members with international would be beneficial to solve this interaction problem. A coping strategy was suggested as challenging themselves to join multiple social organizations and activities by international students to avoid having social isolation problem (Khawaja and Stallman, 2011). Similar to this finding, participants of this study talked about international activities that they have attended very fruitful and helped them feeling more socially connected and confident, which also have positive effects on their academic lives. On the other hand, even if some participants mostly received help by people from the same country of origin, some participants talked about how much their professor and staff at

the university helped during their transition. This was really valuable that they really appreciated this kind of personal connections with local people.

According to Khawaja and Stallman (2011), international students feel a strong emotional support and manage their stress when they share and discuss their problems with international students coming from the same culture. In this study, we see that students reported people from the same country of origin not only help feeling socially more comfortable, they help for practical problems such as finding an apartment. On the other hand, student with similar cultural background might help each other academically, if they study in the same college or department. Another valuable piece that helped in participants' transition was their work in college as a staff in different departments, participating in organization of international activities and/or helping other international students. Some of the participants were working in college offices as a staff. Some students also mentioned helping other internationals was also helping them. For the academic aspect, Khawaja and Stallman (2011) posited that good organization and time management were important strategies to deal with the study problems. Participants of this study add that practice would help, especially academic challenges that are rooted from the language barrier and they also suggested that sometimes international students just need to give themselves time to get used to the environment, to the system. In time, they would feel more comfortable and confident academically and socially. This result is also parallel to the findings of Khawaja and Stallman (2011). Student K's comment explains this well: *Maybe the biggest factor is myself (for the adjustment), because I feel that I have changed in the meantime. I am more open now, I can speak up.*

In terms of international students' use of the university website, college website, and what would be their suggestion for an environment that the college would develop based on their needs, students had a range of expectations and suggestions. As one of the participants said the university website was "the face of the university". Majority of the student visit the university website more before they arrive to the host country, especially check for the application documents and procedures. Students also visit the university website for tuition information, library resources, personal student account, Office of International Students, and for academic calendar. Majority of the participants reported that they visit university website more frequently than the college website. They visit college website for some specific information. Usually they learn about the programs, professors and courses. Some participants said they would prefer to reach more detailed information about the professors, their research, grants, and publications. As stated by Arthur (2017), *"the transition experiences of international students begin prior to arriving to the educational institution, and extend through to the post-graduation experiences"* (p. 892). When students were asked what they would prefer to have in the platform which will be prepared for international students in the college, most reported concept that they would like to see was career development information especially for internationals. Second, they would like to have links to financial resources, education conferences, detailed information about the programs and the courses. Lastly, they

would like to see information to help for daily life such as resources about apartments and cars, and American culture.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore needs of international students at a public university in the United States to develop a platform to improve their interaction with other internationals and the university resources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen graduate students from eight different countries. Participants were asked which type of problems they faced and their coping strategies. Although most reported challenges were language barrier and academic integration, the coping strategies usually appeared in the social aspects of their lives. Working for a program in the school, connections with people who are from the same country of origin, and participating in the activities for internationals were reported as being the most beneficial experiences to deal with the stressors such as the challenges of the academic life, language barrier, and some practical challenges. In terms of reaching the resources to make their lives easier, most of the participants visit the university website more. They visit the university website for application documents, tuition information, library resources, personal student account, Office of International Students (OIS) activities, calendar and supporting activities. They visit the college website for the specific information about the programs, professors, and the courses. Majority of the participants embraced the idea of having a platform, Moodle site, available just for the international students in the college. This would provide them the opportunity to communicate around similar topics. In terms of the content for the links and documents to be included in the Moodle, the most reported concept that they would like to see in Moodle is career development information especially for internationals. The other featured concepts that they mentioned are financial resources, education conferences, detailed information about the programs and the courses, help for daily life such as resources about apartments and cars, and American culture. Participants also had general suggestions for the university to support international students more. The featured suggestions are more academic and social support to feel that university cares about them.

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