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Cultural Experiences of International Students in Canadian and American Higher Education Institutions: Implications for Africans in Canadian Universities

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Abstract

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) admit international students for a variety of purposes, including but not limited to expanding their image and relationships globally, boosting enrollment, and the country's revenue. However, these international students experience a myriad of challenges in their journey to becoming. As an African international student studying in Canada, I decided to carry out a methodology literature review with the intention to examine the cultural experiences of international students in Canada and the United States. I examined over forty (40) articles on the experiences of international students in Canada and the United States with methodological emphasis on ten (10) qualitative studies bearing in mind their research problems, research questions, and methodological approaches.

Keywords: *African students, Canadian universities, Cultural experiences, Higher education, International students*

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1. Introduction

The fact that education is recognized as a crucial tool for fostering economic and social change, human growth, and development in a variety of fields, including science, health sciences, technology, engineering, culture, and education, has led to the internationalization of many Africans and international students at both Canadian and American higher education institutions over the years (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Hurley *et al.*, 2021; Inyama *et al.*, 2016; Netierman, 2021; Okeke-Ihejirika, 2020; Pinder, 2014). Many studies have however described the increase of international students as a response to the global demands and internationalization of universities for recruitment, enhancement of institutional profiles and contacts, improvement in the quality of students, response to international students' needs, and, generation of revenue for their economies (Belkhoja, 2013; Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Okeke-Ihejirika, 2020). According to the Canadian Bureau for International Education (2022), 807,750 international students were studying at all levels of education as of December 2022, 96% of international students recommend Canada as a destination for their studies, and 60% of international students intended to apply for permanent residency in Canada. The Institute of International Education (IIE, 2022) reported that 948,519 international students from more than 200 countries attended American higher education institutions during the 2021/2022 academic year.

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Despite the increase of international students in both Canadian and American Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), a number of studies have bemoaned the lack of support received during the process of integration and acculturation into a new system accompanied by the fact that the migrants are sometimes from backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities, and languages that differ from the host country, Canada and the United States (Avolonto, 2019; Belkhodja, 2013; Chira, 2013; Codjoe, 2006; Francillia, 2012; Halpern, 2022; Hamilton and Shang, 1999; Hurley *et al.*, 2021; Kanu, 2008; Laseinde, 2022; Lewthwaite, 1996; Selvitopu, 2020).

Many international students often seek educational opportunities in countries outside their own for access to quality education and survival in the world. Given this as an African and international student studying in Canada, I decided to carry out a methodology review on literature examining the cultural experiences of other international students. As evident in numerous pieces of literature, I discovered that the multiplicities of challenges being faced by Africans and other international students from different parts of the world align with my experiences in Canada. Some of these challenges include the living conditions of Africans, financial adjustments, learning methods, balancing work and study situations in a new environment, choice of cuisine, culture shock, language barrier, racism, and personal barriers (Boafo-Arthur, 2014; Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1995; Finlayson, 2011; Hampton, 2010; Michalski *et al.*, 2017; Okeke-Ihejirika, 2020; Okusi, 2021; Wilson-Forsberg, 2020).

In observing relatively sparse literature on the lived experiences of Africans in Canadian HEIs, I delved into exploring the international students' cultural experiences in Canadian and American higher education institutions. The aim of this paper was to investigate how other researchers explored international students' experiences in Canadian and US higher education institutions. The paper thus examined the rationale for the methodologies they employed and in relation to the research questions. The article further provided some ramifications for African students studying in Canada.

Given that this is a methodology literature review paper, I closely examined the relationship between the researchers, their research problems, research questions, and methodological approaches. This stemmed from my identity as a racialized and international student who encountered drawbacks during the transition from Nigeria to Canada. As a Nigerian, I have not had the opportunity to travel beyond the borders or across oceans prior to my becoming in Canada. Unfortunately, I did not get the chance to travel to many cities in Nigeria before I departed for Canada. My primary, secondary, and postsecondary education all took place in the city of "Ibadan," where I was raised. Studying in Canada has influenced and challenged my cultural disposition to issues I would not have ever imagined. In this regard, I considered the cultural experiences of international students in Canada and the United States as documented in the literature. In particular, I was interested in how the researchers represented the first-hand perspectives of their participants.

In this paper, I offer an introductory section where I address the current statistics of international students in Canada and the United States. The subsequent section highlights the modus operandi I used in selecting ten articles for methodological review. In my analysis, I present the articles in a table representation identifying the articles, authors, aims, methods, and findings. In addressing that, I delved into how these researchers employed qualitative methods to examine international students' experiences in Canada and the United States. Following a discussion of the ten (10) articles, I argue that there are pressing cultural issues experienced by international students in Canada and the United States. I also observed that while some samples were representative of some qualitative studies, other samples were not.

2. Method

In order to understand the cultural experiences of international students studying in Canada and the United States, I revised the five-stage process of Arksey and O'Malley (2007): developing research questions, engaging in a thorough search process, selecting important articles (I call this a filtering in and out process), familiarizing with the selected papers, and making sense of the collected data. In contrast to Arksey and O'Malley's (2007) scoping review on the most recent experiences of support services for caregivers who assist individuals with mental health challenges, this paper was interested in the methodologies used by other researchers to explore the experiences of international students in Canadian and American higher education institutions.

- Developing Research Questions: In observing relatively sparse literature on the lived experiences of Africans in Canadian HEIs, I delved into exploring the international students' cultural experiences in Canadian and American higher education institutions. The question "What are the cultural experiences of international students studying in Canada and the United States?" guided my search process in the literature.
- Search Process: The databases I consulted during the search process include EBSCO, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia, Eric, Elsevier, JSTOR, Scopus, and ProQuest. Accessing these databases freely (with the help of the head librarian in my faculty) via institutional access motivated my search and thinking practice. I

used some generic keywords such as "experiences of African students in Canada," and "experiences of African students in the Canadian higher education system." I did not get the desired results, so I decided to use short keywords such as "Canada," "Africa," "Nigeria," "Kenya," "Ghana," "Uganda," "higher education," "university," "cultural adjustment," "cultural barrier," "cultural transition," "African migrants." Having noticed the sparse contributions in the area, I decided to examine the cultural experiences of international students in both Canada and the United States with the intention to infer from and reflect on their experiences.

- Filtering Articles: I downloaded over 40 articles for the purpose of the methodology review but I selected 10 qualitative studies for this exercise. Other articles were substantively used as the theoretical basis for my review. The selection of only 10 articles bore down to the inclusion criteria: Was it empirical? Was it qualitative? Were the methods and research questions clearly proposed in the work? Was it a journal article? Did it connect with the cultural problem I intend to address in both countries? Was it published in English? Was it peer-reviewed?
- Familiarization with the Selected Articles: The aim of this stage was to ensure that the studies to be reviewed passed the inclusion criteria I identified in the preceding section, and familiarize myself with the research questions and methodologies for the purpose of extracting data.
- Making Sense of Collected Data: This is the analysis and discussion stage where the data collected from the preceding stage becomes available to the readers. Given that this is a methodological literature review paper, I examined the differences and relationships in research findings and limitations of the selected studies. All these became achievable by examining the research questions and methodologies in different selected studies. An overview of the qualitative studies I selected is presented in the subsequent section.

3. Analysis

In keeping with the objective of the paper, ten (10) qualitative studies were selected and represented in Table 1.

Table 1: Cultural Experiences of International Students in Canadian and US Higher Education Institutions

Article	Purpose	Method(s)	Findings
• International students attending Canadian universities: their experiences with housing, finances, and other issues (Calder *et al.*, 2006)	• It looked at some of the challenges that international students face while they pursue their academic careers at colleges and how these obstacles affect their entire experience	• Survey and interviews, snowball sampling, document analysis	• Suitable housing, financial constraints, unemployment, cultural integration, and currency fluctuations are major barriers that international students encountered
• A qualitative study of the experiences of black students attending a Canadian university (Hamilton and Shang, 1999)	• It discussed the differences between black students' experiences on mostly black campuses in the United States and those of black students in Canada	• In-depth interviews	• Social isolation, non-inclusion of the curriculum, and unsupportive professors, as well as communities are the common barriers
• A study of the first-year international students at a Canadian University: challenges and experiences with social integration (Zhou and Zhang, 2014)	• It highlighted the challenges faced by international students integrating into Canadian universities	• Focus groups and interviews	• Given the pressing issue of student retention in Canadian institutions, the study's findings serve as an impetus for higher education

Table 1 (Cont.)

Article	Purpose	Method(s)	Findings
• Internationalization of Canadian higher education: discrepancies between policies and international student experiences (Guo and Guo, 2017)	• It discussed the internationalization policies experienced by international undergraduates in Western Canada	• The study interviewed 26 students from 9 countries	• The study revealed a number of challenges such as the neoliberal approach, limited integration of international students' concerns in the institution's curriculum
• African international teaching assistants' experience ofracial micro-aggressions in a Canadian higher education institution (Ankomah, 2022)	• It described the everyday racist behaviors (micro-aggressions) that African international teaching assistants (AITAs) encounter in a Canadian institution	• Seven former AITAs were interviewed	• Non-Black students routinely questioned AITAs' comprehension of the subject matter, dismissed their communication skills in English, and exhibited aggressive tendencies
• Should I stay or should I go? International students' decision-making about staying in Canada (Netierman *et al.*, 2022)	• It examined the factors that impact international students' choice of post- graduation location	• Symbolic interactionist method, interviews, 60 international students	• Familial duties, cultural environment, employment opportunities, and permanent residency amongst others are reasons why international students consider Canada after their studies
• Exploring sense of belonging among Black international students at an HBCU (Mwangi, 2016)	• It addressed HBCU students' feeling of belonging on campus	• 10 Black international HBCU students were interviewed. A multi-participant descriptive case study method was used	• Black international HBCU students' conceptions of race and nativity influence their university experiences as they attempted to preserve a national identity while adjusting to the HBCU atmosphere and participating in cross-cultural relationships with Black Americans
• International students' lived experiences with intercultural competence in a Southwest Florida University (Halpern *et al.*, 2022)	• International students at a university in Southwest Florida were studied with regard to their lived academic, institutional, and interpersonal experiences	• Interviews, 12 international students, phenomenological research design	• The students' performance in class and in their social life was significantly impacted by their lack of intercultural competency in each area
• Examining the cultural adjustment experiences of African international college students: a qualitative analysis (Constantine *et al.*, 2005)	• It examined how international students dealt with cultural acculturation	• Consensual qualitative research methods, 12 students, and semi-structured interviews	• Pre-and-post-experiences of international students, cultural adjustments challenges and coping mechanisms, discriminatory treatment, and counseling are substantial in thefindings
• An intersectional understanding of African graduate students' experiences in US higher education (Mwangi *et al.*, 2018)	• It concentrated on how institutional oppressions and institutions affect the experiences of African international graduate students in American higher education	• Counter storytelling, open sampling	• It espoused the negative social positioning and the resistance to marginalizing experiences of the students

4. Discussion

In this section, I provide highlights regarding the methodological approaches utilized in the selected qualitative studies. I concentrate on the research problem, research questions, and samples used in the studies. The justification for the selection of qualitative studies is anchored on the resourcefulness in gathering first-hand lived cultural experiences of the international students.

Most of the selected qualitative studies adopted an interpretative approach to understanding the cultural experiences of international students in Canada and the United States. I found nine of ten studies employed interviews in addressing challenges such as racism, discrimination, verbal attacks, communication barrier, suitable housing, unsupportive professors, social isolation, and non-inclusion in the curriculum. Mwangi *et al*. (2018) on the other hand used counter-storytelling and open sampling in understanding how institutional oppressions affect the experiences of African international students. While these studies offer great and varying insights into understanding the complexities of international students' experiences in both Canada and the United States, a major limitation I found is in the restricted sample utilized in most of the qualitative studies.

4.1. Cultural Experiences of International Students in Canadian and US Higher Education Institutions

Given the findings in several studies, it is indeed true that the influx of immigrants and the increased enrolment of international graduate students in Canada and the United States have reshaped their educational landscape. However, a number of studies have also investigated and reported the varied cultural challenges encountered by international students in both Canadian and American higher education institutions (Avolonto, 2019; Chukwu, 2019; Francillia, 2012; Osikomaiya, 2014; Rosbrook, 2020). A qualitative study conducted by Ankomah (2022) relayed the experiences of African international teaching assistants in Canadian HEIs as phenomenal given the everyday racist experiences that Africans and international students go through in carrying out their responsibilities as teaching assistants. This is evident in some of the responses from the participants on how they were being labeled as "slow and boring" or questioned about "their appointment as a TA."

While Ankomah's (2022) qualitative study could be described uniquely as having interviewed seven former African International Teaching Assistants (AITAs) to address its research question "How did former AITAs experience racism in their work?" I found that there are many international students who encounter micro-aggression at Canadian faculties, departments, and institutions. The strength of the study can be seen in how participants were interviewed in their respective homes. In fact, the collected data may not have been genuine if it had happened within the confines of their workplace as it may hinder the participants from sharing their true lived experiences. I am also not certain if the teaching assistants interviewed in this study were aware of any policies guiding the recruitment of international students in the universities. Unfortunately, this is an existing gap that many studies both in the United States and Canada are yet to address. Guo and Guo (2017) share these nuances in their narration of the discrepancies between internationalization policy and practice at a Canadian university. Almost all the 26 participants interviewed shared their challenges with cultural adjustments and transition citing instances of how the English language was a barrier to communicating with domestic students as a result of their background as Chinese. Even the few participants who could communicate in English lamented how they were perceived as unintelligent owing to their accents. Other factors included a lack of common interests and verbal attacks even from their colleagues advising them to return to their home country (Saidjadi, 2018).

I however observed that Guo and Guo (2022) almost failed to make a good representation of its participants as 16 of the interviewed participants were from China, 2 were from Japan, and 1 each from Hong Kong, South Korea, Kuwait, United States, El Salvador, Iran, Kuwait, and Taiwan. The study would have been more representative if it limited its participants to Chinese given the quality of 16 representatives in the study. The use of snowball sampling and policy analyses as methodological elements in the study reveals the authenticity of identifying a problem and proffering possible solutions as it is found in the body of the paper.

A similar study is a phenomenological study by Halpern *et al*. (2022) aimed to understand the intercultural competence of 12 international students (from Brazil, Colombia, Honduras, Kenya, Tunisia, Pakistan, Finland, Germany, Italy, and Albania) at Southwest Florida University in the United States. The first attraction of this study is the positionality of the researchers. They found out that their positionalities offered invaluable insights into understanding the experiences of the participants. The participants were more comfortable sharing their lived experiences bearing in mind that the researchers also experienced them. The findings of this study are not totally different from other studies as they shed light on the absence of intercultural competence at micro or interpersonal and macro or institutional levels. One of the limitations I

found in this qualitative study is the ambiguity across contexts considering the participants involved in the study. It would have been richer if the participants were limited to a particular region.

Prior to a number of qualitative studies on the experiences of international students, Hamilton and Shang (1999) documented the experiences of Canadian Black students through a comparison with other African American students' experiences. In-depth interviews were employed to collect data from 9 students (three men and six women) at a university in Southern Ontario. This apparently reveals the necessity of qualitative inquiry in understanding the lived experiences of human beings over the years. Although the authors shared concerns about the difficulty in locating a homogenous group, the interview questions captured the problems of identity crises, isolation, and racism. These are identical problems raised in a number of studies (see Avolonto, 2019; David *et al.*, 2022; El Masri, 2021; Evivie, 2009; Francillia, 2012; Hampton, 2010; Hurley *et al.*, 2021; Laseinde, 2022; Omorodion, 2021). Unlike other qualitative studies examined, two respondents in this study described a feeling of contentment and satisfaction with their college experience. The authors also identified a participant who declined to be involved in the study given the uncertainty in the intention of the researcher. This is one of the reasons why I described qualitative studies as ethically inclined as it gives room for participants to decide on their own if they want to be involved or do otherwise.

This perspective was also shared by Mwangi though in a different context. Depending on the use of open sampling in collecting data, Mwangi (2016) investigated the sense of belonging of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). While the objective of the article was to address the sense of belonging of black international students in the United States, I found it compelling how the students were recruited (Nigeria, Kenya, Jamaica, Haiti, Senegal, Trinidad, Ghana, and Eritrea), and how the data collection and analysis stages were carried out. This study projects how stereotypes and racial identity become a barrier to belongingness on campus.

What distinguishes this qualitative study is the provision of a different narrative to the issue of cultural adjustments and transition of African students. While this may not be generalized or extended as sameness among other international students, the use of interviews and multi-participant descriptive case study method employed in the study were able to provide clarity on the negative preconceptions of the participants about their fellow Black Americans who were born in the United States. Another methodological implication in this study is the feeling and urge to be successful as international students in a foreign land which other studies equally addressed (Avolonto, 2019; Belkhodja, 2013; Chira, 2013; Finlayson, 2011; Inyama, 2016; Kanu, 2008; Rosbrook, 2020).

Constantine *et al.* (2005) while examining the cultural adjustment experiences of African international students in the United States also identified the pre-sojourn and post-sojourn dilemmas of interviewed participants on how they considered the United States a better place to study than their countries of origin prior to arriving at their destination, and eventually how they ended up with a broad range of cultural adjustment issues of White cultural values, hegemony, disappointment, depression, culture shock, verbal attacks, anger, racial discrimination, amongst others. One of the limitations of this study is its failure to explicitly address how its methods were conveyed. It however sheds light on the critical cultural concerns of international students which sometimes led to mental health problems of the international students.

Zhou and Zhang's (2014) qualitative study on the experiences of first-year international students at a Canadian university corroborates many of the studies on the issue of cultural or social integration in Canada. Adopting a mixed-method design, the authors were able to identify the perspectives and experiences of international students. The study made use of focus group discussion which gave room for the first-year international students to discuss how the English language curricula in Canadian institutions served as a barrier to their learning owing to cultural differences. The findings of this study validate the experiences of other international students at another Canadian university in Guo and Guo (2017). Although the findings were informative, other qualitative methods would have been explored to discuss the shared experiences of international students that debar them from other routines on campus.

Discussing the cultural experiences of international students as a global phenomenon, Mwangi *et al.* (2018) in the United States put forward the questions: "How do African international graduate students experience the academic and social transition to college in the United States? And what is the role of campus structures and climate in the transition and success of African international graduate students in the United States? In addressing this, the authors focused on two subsets of participants – African international graduate students (from Nigeria, Malawi, Rwanda, Ghana, Zimbabwe, and Senegal) and ten faculty and campus administrators who worked directly with international graduate students.

The study possesses a good demonstration of a qualitative study given its recruitment, data collection, and analysis. The generative themes derived from the responses of the participants "Everything is based on US Standards, I Don't Think the Priorities are on the International Students, Some People Make it Sound like They Saved You, The Things We

are Doing on Our Own Which I Think the School Should" describe the cultural insensitiveness from the US institution where the study was carried out. The findings in terms of acceptance, support, and internationalization are similar to what was established in many studies (Chukwu, 2019; Michalski *et al.*, 2017; Noreiga and Justin, 2021; Osikomaiya, 2014).

A counter-qualitative study of the common lived experiences of international students in the United States and Canada can be found in Calder *et al.*'s qualitative study (2016). Through the combination of content analysis and interviews with key informants such as service providers, university personnel, and the international student office at a Western Canadian university, the authors were able to identify that although there are existing problems with international student housing, support, and struggles to meet basic needs, there are yet some silences on the part of the international students. An agency worker, through an interview, described this feeling as a stigma for help where nobody wants to share the struggles with those who may be of assistance. However, one of the international students described the urge to share their struggles with their supervisor, but they were concerned about evoking pity.

Despite the cultural experiences of international students, I decided to explore the decision-making of international students, and I found Netierman (2022) to be relevant for this educational voyage. In the bid to understand the growing concern of "what next after studies" of international students in Canada, the qualitative study employed a symbolic interactionist approach to analyze the semi-structured interviews collected from 60 international students who are enrolled in post-secondary programs in Canada. The study however identified that the decision is formed gradually as a result of factors such as employment opportunities, familial obligations, and the possibility of obtaining permanent residency.

5. Conclusion

Inferring from the selected qualitative studies, the methods offered nuances in understanding the varying cultural perspectives of international students in Canada and the United States. The studies captured some cultural experiences in several colleges and educational contexts. While it may be observed that there is a relatively sparse discussion on the cultural experiences of African students in Canada, some studies have investigated the experiences of international students in Canada and the United States.

I acknowledged how different authors used qualitative approaches to understand international students' lived experiences in different contexts. One of the methodological gaps I observed in these studies is the methods and samples employed by the authors. While some studies provided justification for their methodology and samples, others failed to. I acknowledged that through the use of content analysis and interviews, Calder (2016) was able to provide insights into the struggles and silences of international students in a Western Canadian university. Unlike other studies that employed interviews, Mwangi *et al.* (2018) made use of counter-storytelling to understand the stories of minorities in academic scholarship and education. I found these studies as a good representation of a qualitative inquiry considering their recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

I found Guo and Guo's qualitative study (2022) and Halpern *et al.*'s (2022) phenomenological study not representative enough as I described that the richness of a qualitative study inhabits in its quality not quantity. I described this as a limitation given the ambiguity in the implicit generalization of international students' experiences across regional contexts. Although these studies provided nuanced insights into the lived experiences of international students, they may not necessarily capture the experiences of international students in a way that is generalized which is expected of qualitative studies. In addition, including different socioeconomic statuses, genders, sexual orientations, and abilities in future research will provide a detailed understanding of international graduate students' experiences in both Canadian and US higher education institutions.

I also considered Constantine *et al.* (2005) not explicit in conveying how the methods were employed and triangulated in their study. For Zhou and Zhang (2014), I suggested that the incorporation of qualitative methods would have been an ideal component in discussing the shared experiences of international students that hinder their involvement in other campus activities. In the efforts to understand the lived experiences of the participants, I found the use of interviews as a crucial tool considering how most studies employed it. However, I noted that none of the studies explored other qualitative methods such as narrative inquiry, ethnography, arts-based methodology, indigenous methodology, and post-qualitative inquiry. I also observed the lack of rigor (confirmability, dependability, transferability, and credibility) in some of the selected qualitative studies (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Such studies (Ankomah, 2022; Calder *et al.*, 2016; Guo and Guo, 2022; Mwangi, 2016; Mwangi *et al.*, 2018) passed the test of rigor.

Future research in education will be significantly impacted by the examination of these scholarly articles. The representation of African students is one area of scholarship that future research might build on by including a greater spectrum of people from varied socioeconomic origins, geographic locations, and immigration statuses. Researchers can better understand the needs and experiences of African students studying at Canadian institutions or elsewhere by employing qualitative methods that are representative of the problems they intend to address. The qualitative methods include those employed in the selected articles and the alternatives proposed in this paper.

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