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Original Article

Experiences of International Graduate Students at Makerere University

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The enrollment of international graduate students is declining at Makerere University. Yet, Makerere aspires to be a research-led institution with an internationalization agenda. There is a need to increase the number of international graduate students as this would help Makerere University to realize its vision. This study, therefore, explored international graduate students' experiences at Makerere University, and the following objective guided it: to explore the experiences of international graduate students at Makerere University. The study was based on the interpretive worldview, subscribing to the transcendental phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, which states that those who have experienced a phenomenon can give it meaning. Eight international graduate students at Makerere University were interviewed, and they were selected from different academic disciplines, which were categorized according to Becher and Biglan's classification. Data were thematically analyzed, whereby two themes, namely non-academic experiences and academic experiences, emerged. It was therefore concluded that international graduate students at Makerere University had both positive and negative non-academic and academic experiences. This study recommends that Makerere University Management should strengthen measures that lead to positive experiences for international graduate students, such as the provision of financial resources, strengthening the operations of the International Office, organizing events for graduate students to facilitate their interactions with the domestic students, and putting in place peer mentors for new international graduate students to foster a sense of community. This study also recommends that the International Office work very closely with the Deans of Schools in the different colleges of Makerere University. This will improve their academic experiences and, ultimately, their numbers at Makerere University. Finally, the university management should strengthen and streamline the activities of the International Office at Makerere University.

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INTRODUCTION

International graduate students often embark on a unique academic journey, navigating cultural, linguistic, and academic experiences. Adapting to a new educational system, forming new connections, and balancing culture and integrations with rigorous studies are integral aspects of their experiences (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; García et al., 2019). Over the past 50 years, there has been increased international student mobility, which has resulted in high enrolments in higher education institutions worldwide (Perez-Encinas & Ammigan, 2016). However, the trends and volume of international students' mobility have metamorphosed significantly into multidimensional experiences such as academic stress, language barriers, and isolation. Once international students arrive at a particular institution in their host country, they are expected to integrate academically and socially into the new society. Unfortunately, international students face many challenges adjusting to and coping with their new learning environments (García et al., 2019; Neves & Hillman, 2017). With its research-led status anchored in its strategic plan of 2018-2019 and 2020-2030, Makerere university has over the years attracted international students for undergraduate and graduate studies (Bisaso, 2017; Bisaso & Nakamanya, 2018). The university has collaborations and partnerships with universities in other countries and agencies at regional and international levels facilitating the exchange of students. Therefore, she receives graduate students from various parts of the world. While at campus, these students share diverse and enriching experiences. They appreciate the cultural exposure, academic challenges and the vibrant atmosphere on campus. Networking with students from various backgrounds enhances their global perspective (Kiiza, 2019). However, those experiences, they undergo which include adapting

to a new academic system, cultural differences, language barriers and sometimes individual preferences can either enhance or create hurdles to their goal attainment and subsequently that of Makerere university which is to be research led university (Bisaso & Nakamanya, 2018). On this basis, this study explored the experiences of international graduate students at Makerere University

Statement of the Problem

International graduate students make significant economic, cultural, and social contributions to their host institutions (Kiiza, 2019). As such, Makerere University has currently positioned itself as a research-led institution that seeks to advance relevant research for social and economic development through the process of internationalization (Bisaso & Nakamanya, 2018). Makerere University has also invested heavily in driving stakeholders in this strategic direction through strategic plans, providing policies, and supportive institutional structures to advance the university's internationalization strategy (Bisaso & Nakamanya, 2018). Therefore, as a research-led institution with an internationalization agenda, Makerere University is expected to recruit and retain international graduate students to benefit the university's global reputation and research output (Bisaso, 2017). Despite these initiatives, international students' enrolment is declining at Makerere University. Statistics show that whereas 4183 students enrolled in 2008/ 2009, their number dropped to 657 in 2012/2014 (Bisaso, 2017). This situation worsened by 2021, whereby the enrolment of international students had declined to 600 (Makerere University, 2021). If this situation persists, it is likely to negatively impact Makerere University's global research collaboration and reputation, possibly obstructing its progress toward becoming a research-led institution.

Though some studies have been conducted on international students (Kiiza, 2019; Ssempebwa et al., 2014), little has been done on their experiences at Makerere University. It is against this background that this study explored experiences and support services provided to international graduate students at Makerere University.

Research Question

What are the experiences of international graduate students at Makerere University?

RELATED LITERATURE

Theoretical Review

This study was guided by the International Student Adjustment Framework, which was developed by Aguirre in 2019. The framework stipulates that international students go through four stages in a university setting, and these include vulnerability, self-awareness, alliances, and synergy. Whereas the vulnerability stage entailed academic stress, language barriers, gender, and major, the self-awareness stage encompassed culture. The Alliance stage included international colleagues and a supportive network. The synergy stage is about the university environment (Aguirre, 2019). The framework suggests that the categories are flexible and progressive because people's experiences are different as they relate to studying overseas. This framework illustrates the influence of students' experiences and the environmental conditions that facilitate their adjustment (Bimpong, 2023). Yet, students' willingness to adapt is the result of their acquaintances, personal traits, self-assurance, social support, length in the country, and participation in college student support programs (Bochner, 2011)

Empirical Review

The experiences of international graduate students range from academic, social, and social cultural (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Hyams-Ssekasi et al., 2014). The intensity of these experiences varies depending on the context, on students' adaptive skills, and on how they are perceived by the students themselves (Hussain & Shen, 2019). On

the issue of academic experiences, studies indicate that these vary widely depending on factors such as the country and institution they are studying in, their field of study, and their individual circumstances (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Kim et al., 2019; Marijanovic et al., 2021). Academic experience comprises all those factors that meaningfully influence all the learning practices of international students. These factors include the ability and competence of lecturers, the quality of the lectures, the organization of courses and academic content, language education, and professional preparation (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Marijanovic et al., 2021).

Scholars observed that international students have to fit into the new academic environment with its unique demands, such as course selection, communication with lecturers, understanding them, and a new assessment system (Hussain & Shen, 2019; Lin & Scherz, 2014). These scholars argued that the new academic system, coupled with the requirements of new skills, leads international students to a variety of influences, both positive and negative. However, studies reflect that the quality of teaching and easy access to lecturers are perceived to be key variables influencing student satisfaction (Ghalayini, 2014; Kim et al., 2019). Consequently, the teaching beliefs that combine these aspects are crucial for fulfilling the educational requirements of international graduate students (Aguirre, 2019). Research also suggests that language can be a challenge for international graduate students, especially if they are studying in a country where the primary language of instruction is not their native language, because language ability affects their classroom participation, understanding of course material, and communication with professors and peers (Contreras-Aguirre & Gonzalez, 2017; Nwokedi & Khanare, 2020a). It is, therefore, established that in academia, learning satisfaction is significantly linked with the overall university experience of international students (Ammigan & Perez-Encinas, 2018; Wu et al., 2015).

Literature highlights that international graduate students with different national experiences perceive the learning environment differently, especially when compared with native students (Singh, 2021; Zhang & Rienties, 2016). In North America, emphasis is placed on independent and critical thinking, problem-based learning, interpreting information, and developing and communicating knowledge. Despite that fact, many international students come from educational cultures where priority is given to memorizing, understanding, and reproducing information (Kim et al., 2019). While others are more accustomed to listening and learning rather than speaking in class (Kim et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019). This, coupled with the heavy workload compared to what some international students are exposed to in their native countries, poses an academic challenge to international graduate students (Qadeer et al., 2021; Wu et al., 2015).

The experiences which international students undergo and the inherent stressors of academia put a lot of pressure on them, especially when it interacts with one's well-being, which can negatively impact their academic performance (Nwokedi & Khanare, 2020b; Wang & Li, 2011; Zhang-Wu, 2018). It is also established that the availability and quality of research facilities can vary widely between institutions. Whereas some universities have state-of-the-art laboratories and equipment (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018; Zhang-Wu, 2018), others have limited resources, which may negatively influence international graduate students' experiences, especially in the science field (Zhang-Wu, 2018). In the same way, the unfamiliar education system, learning environment, lecture styles, assessment modes, and the relationship between students and lecturers contribute to the academic experiences that international graduate students go through that can either positively or negatively influence their stay and successful endeavours in the host country (George et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2019; Li et al., 2019). It is, therefore, imperative to understand the experiences of international graduate students as this can inform the undertaking of appropriate support services.

Equally important are the social experiences of international graduate students in their host countries. Though literature Kang and Kim (2017) and Matsushima (2016) indicate that universities offer orientation programs on academic resources, visa regulations, and cultural integration to help international students acclimate to their new environment, adjust to a new culture, and build relationships with local and international peers is still observed to be both rewarding and challenging. This is because some students still experience culture shock, and others seem to thrive in the diverse environment of an international campus (Benson et al., 2018; Buchanan, 2019). This is an issue that is worth investigating. The literature further indicates that the social integration of some international students has limited interaction due to a lack of resources, little knowledge about the host countries, and an inability to station themselves (Kang & Kim, 2017; Matsushima, 2016). It is observed that some international students feel marginalized and isolated when they try to integrate into their institutions, and as a result, some seek refuge by visiting and bonding with other international students (Buchanan, 2019; Mudhovozi, 2012). This, to some extent, deprives them of the benefits of indulging with the local community, yet those who keep only to themselves are prone to (Benson & Morgan, 2016; Buchanan, 2019).

Loneliness among international students, which is categorized as personal loneliness, social loneliness, network loneliness, and loneliness in institutional settings, is attributed to the absence of intimate persons that they can relate to and the lack of cultural fit (Girmay, 2017; Guo & Guo, 2017). Whereas some scholars attribute this loneliness to personal characteristics of an individual, others connect it to the language barrier, which sometimes makes it hard for international students to form connections with local students and the broader community due to difficulty in expressing themselves and understanding others that can lead to feelings of loneliness (Buchanan, 2019; Gomes & Tran, 2017; Nwokedi, 2015). Still, some international

students have attributed it to being far away from home and separated from family and familiar surroundings and the rigorous demands of graduate studies, which can be emotionally taxing due to additional pressure to excel academically, consequently leading to social withdrawal (Mudhovozi, 2012). Relatedly, the prevalence of both implicit and explicit discrimination and racism in some countries coupled with discrimination and some racist connotations reflect low acceptance levels of foreigners, most especially in white communities (Benson & Morgan, 2016; Buchanan, 2019; Guo & Guo, 2017). This is reinforced by the unwillingness of local students to connect with international students in some developed countries such as Canada and the United States of America, making integration of students difficult to take place (Buchanan, 2019; Guo & Guo, 2017).

Furthermore, studies indicate that the accommodation experiences of international graduate students widely vary depending on the location of their university, the housing options available, and their personal preferences (McGregor et al., 2022; Nwokedi, 2015). Some universities offer on-campus housing options for graduate students, which include dormitories, apartments, or graduate student housing complexes, which may be limited by availability and high costs (Lambert & Usher, 2013; Naidoo, 2015). Literature indicates that many international graduate students choose to live off-campus in apartments, houses, or shared accommodations (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016; Naidoo, 2015). This can provide more independence and a wider range of housing choices. However, renting off-campus housing requires students to navigate local housing markets and lease agreements, which can be challenging, especially if they are not familiar with the area (Benson & Morgan, 2016; O'Reilly et al., 2015). Some opt to share accommodation with roommates or housemates as this can be a cost-effective way to split rent and expenses and also provide opportunities for socializing and building a support network (Benson & Morgan, 2016; O'Reilly et al., 2015). Nevertheless, finding compatible roommates and

resolving conflicts can be challenging (Benson et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Naidoo (2015) argues that the housing options available, such as furnished or unfurnished, and the location of the university has an impact on the cost of accommodation, which may constrain the budget of international students if not carefully planned. Additionally, the location of accommodation in relation to the university campus can greatly impact a student's daily life because proximity to campus can make commuting more convenient and may provide better access to academic and social resources (George Mwangi et al., 2019). It is revealed that understanding and navigating lease agreements, including lease duration, security deposits, and tenant responsibilities, is crucial for international graduate students. Yet, legal differences in lease terms between countries significantly vary (Calder et al., 2016; Kovacs Burns et al., 2014). Finally, the type of accommodation influences a student's social life owing to the fact that on-campus housing offers more opportunities to interact with fellow students, while off-campus options provide a quieter and more private environment (Calder et al., 2016; Kovacs Burns et al., 2014). All the above experiences are crucial to international graduate students, hence the need for this study at Makerere University.

As regards social networking experiences of international graduate students, research reveals that these can be both rewarding and challenging because they involve navigating a complex mix of cultural, language, and academic factors while seeking to build meaningful links with peers and mentors in a foreign environment (Menzie & Baron, 2014; Moglen, 2017). It is established that international graduate students have the opportunity to interact with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds, as this diversity can lead to rich cultural exchanges, helping them to broaden their perspectives and learn about different customs, traditions, and worldviews (Menzie & Baron, 2014; Moglen, 2017). However, language sometimes becomes a barrier for international students, especially if the language of instruction

is not their native (Menzie & Baron, 2014; Mudhovozi, 2012; Zhang-Wu, 2018). This challenge can be overcome by forming close-knit communities with others who speak their native language, which further alienates them (Mudhovozi, 2011). Similarly, Zhou (2010) argues that most universities have student associations or clubs specifically for international students.

Joining such groups provides a sense of belonging and support, as well as opportunities to connect with fellow international students who share similar experiences (Beech, 2015; Menzie & Baron, 2014; Moglen, 2017). In the same way, international graduate students often have the chance to build valuable academic networks by collaborating with professors and fellow students on research projects or participating in conferences and workshops (Beech, 2015; Moglen, 2017). Universities, therefore, organize social events and cultural programs to help international students integrate into the local community. These events provide opportunities to make friends, learn about the host culture, and enjoy recreational activities (Rose-Redwood, 2010; Zhou, 2010). Moglen (2017) also observed that international graduate students often use social media and online platforms to connect with peers both within their universities and from around the world. At the same time, they engage in networking activities related to their career aspirations, building professional connections through internships, part-time jobs, or alumni networks that are essential for their future career prospects (Beech, 2015; Moglen, 2017; Rose-Redwood, 2010).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the experiences of international graduate students in universities are shaped by a combination of academic rigor, cultural diversity, resource limitations, and the specific circumstances of the country and institution they choose (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016; Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018; Kasese-Hara & Mugambi, 2021). Adaptability, resilience, and willingness to engage with the local culture are often key factors in making the

most of their educational journey (Bista, 2016). Kasese-Hara and Mugambi (2021) found that Sub-Saharan Africa is home to a rich tapestry of cultures and languages. International students, therefore, have the opportunity to interact with people from various ethnic backgrounds, and this diversity leads to valuable cultural exchanges (Kumi-Yeboah, 2015). On the contrary, Arthur (2017) observed that in this part of the world, English is commonly used as the medium of instruction in many universities, meaning that students from non-English-speaking countries may face language barriers.

In addition, Kumi-Yeboah (2015) reveals that some universities use local languages for instruction, which can be challenging for international students. Furthermore, some universities in Sub-Saharan Africa have limited resources, including outdated library facilities, laboratory equipment, and infrastructure. Therefore, international students need to adapt to these resource constraints (Dominguez-Whitehead, 2018; Zhang-Wu, 2018). Scholarships and funding opportunities are limited. Meanwhile, many international students face financial challenges in the form of tuition fees, living expenses, and health care costs (McGregor et al., 2022; Nwokedi, 2015). On the issue of accommodation, it is established that finding suitable housing is a bit challenging, and as a result, international graduate students need to navigate the local housing market, yet some universities provide on-campus housing options while others do not (Ammigan & Jones, 2018; Nwokedi, 2015). Coupled with this challenge are safety and security concerns that vary from country to country; such a situation calls for students' awareness of local safety guidelines and taking precautions to ensure their well-being (Ammigan & Jones, 2018).

Basing on the above literature, international graduate students' experiences are multifaceted (Buchanan, 2019; Kang & Kim, 2017), encompassing academic, cultural, personal, and professional dimensions. While these experiences offer numerous opportunities for growth and

development (Buchanan, 2019; Kang & Kim, 2017; Li et al., 2019), they also present challenges that require resilience and adaptability (Bista, 2016; Li, 2015). Ultimately, the experiences of international graduate students contribute to their unique journeys and help shape their futures. Hence, a need to explore the experiences of international graduate students at Makerere University.

METHODOLOGY

The interview and document check methods were used in this study. Using unstructured interviews with open-ended questions enabled the researcher to have face-to-face interaction and discussion with participants to get rich and detailed data about their experiences, thoughts, feelings, and impressions of the phenomena in their own words (Kumar, 2018). This method of data collection gave the researcher a chance to clarify questions, probe, and get first-hand information from my participants regarding their experiences and support services provided to them as international graduate students at Makerere University (Aarnio & Kulmala, 2016). The document check method was also used in this study by reviewing documents in appropriate offices to get recorded information related to international graduate student support services such as policies, reports, and the strategic plan.

Data were collected using instruments such as an unstructured interview guide and a document checklist. An unstructured interview guide was used to solicit data from international graduate students through verbal interaction, and this helped in controlling the line of questioning so that information on study objectives was obtained. A document checklist was used to cross-check information from some documents, which helped in the triangulation of data in this study. These included a list of Makerere University-approved relevant policies on the issue under investigation, the strategic plan, and Graduate handbook and records from the office of the Dean of Students at Makerere University.

FINDINGS/ RESULTS

Participants were asked to describe their experiences at Makerere University. Similar responses were categorized to derive sub-themes that were analysed. The sub-themes are derived based on the number of times a response is given. The sub-themes developed are scholarly experiences, institutional barriers, accommodation, loneliness, feeding, weather, health care services, attaining a study visa, financial assistance, transport, language barrier, and discrimination.

Scholarly Experiences

Scholarly experiences are a crucial part of international graduate students' experiences at Makerere University. Scholarly experiences refer to all sorts of encounters by students relating to educational life. It encompasses interfacing with, and ability to adapt to the learning technologies, academic, and regulatory policies, interactions with the lecturers and students in a learning situation, ability to attend and listen to lectures, understanding the language and mode of teaching, reading books, accessing, and using laboratory and library equipment, completing course works and assignments and other experiences in which scholarly takes place. From the participants' responses, academic experiences in this study included academic interactions with lecturers, lecture presentations, research supervision, cross-cutting courses, class discussions, mentorship, availability, and use of study resources and infrastructure. Participants IGSM1, IGSP1, and IGSP3 expressed their views on the relationship between international graduate students and their lecturers. From the participants' assertions, such relationships improved classroom discussions and boosted their confidence. In line with this, IGSP3 from the hard-applied discipline reported that:

All my lecturers are approachable. They encourage questions and discussions. That way, I have had some great academic conversations with them. You know, approachability encourages open dialogue

and creates a safe space for asking questions without fear of judgment.

Contrary to the above response, IGSP1 from the hard pure discipline found some lecturers not easy to interact with. In fact, he said that he prefers sharing his academic challenges with colleagues because they are more supportive. In his words, he shared that:

I have had lecturers who seem disinterested with students outside of lecturers. It creates a disconnection and affects the learning experience. Some even tend to ignore the fact that clear communication from them about expectations and assignments, even outside class, is crucial, especially for us international students who do not have strong connections here. That is why sometimes I prefer seeking assistance with assignments from colleagues.

Similarly, IGSM3, IGSP1, and IGSP2 unanimously agreed to the regular attendance of their lectures, though some had misgivings about the language mix during lecture presentations. IGSM3 from the soft pure discipline revealed that:

You know how some professors tend to switch to the local language during their lectures. It has been quite challenging for me to follow along, especially when they switch back and forth between English and the local language. This makes me feel alienated from the learning process during the lecture.

Participants also emphasized the issue of classroom discussions and presentations, which they acknowledged as a contributory factor to their career path as IGSP2 from the hard applied discipline shared;

I enjoy classroom discussions and presentations, and that is why I appreciate professors who facilitate inclusive discussions. I also enjoy those who ensure that all our ideas are heard regardless of their research areas. During the presentations, professors encouraged us to challenge each other's viewpoints respectfully, which

fostered a dynamic learning environment. Consequently, we learned a lot from each other during the presentations, and the insights enriched our research work.

Despite the positive voices on classroom discussions and presentations given above, another IGSP2 from the soft applied disciplinary field had a varying view. He corroborated that in his class, some students do not want to cooperate with their colleagues in researching group activities to be presented in class. He revealed that:

In group discussions, it is disheartening when my ideas are ignored or brushed aside, leaving me feeling invisible. Yet, I have invested a lot of time in doing research when my group mates only waited to present work which they had not participated in its preparation. Sometimes, class discussions feel dominated by a few vocal students, which makes it hard for others to contribute.

Participants also shared that the research supervision they receive has a bearing on their academic experiences. Along these lines, a participant IGSP4 from the soft pure field submitted that:

My supervisors' guidance greatly enriches my research journey. They provide a perfect balance of self-sufficiency and support, which allows me to explore my ideas while offering valuable insights. Regular meetings and immediate constructive feedback have helped me to stay on track, and this has motivated me to push on with my research work.

In addition, IGSM4 from the hard applied discipline disclosed that within her department, they engage in funded research projects to generate new knowledge that is useful for society's well-being. Therefore, supervision is serious because there must be value for money. She submitted that:

I was fortunate to have a supervisor who treated me as a colleague rather than just a student. Our brainstorming sessions were

intense and productive leading to innovative research directions. Their willingness to collaborate and co-author papers empowered me to feel like an active contributor to the field. They want to ensure that we finish our research work before the project expires.

Nevertheless, some participants expressed some reservations as regards research supervision as shared by IGSP2 from the soft applied discipline.

My supervisor's feedback is so contradictory that I am not sure what they want from me. It is frustrating to revise repeatedly without clear guidance. I feel like my project direction changes every time I meet with my supervisor. This inconsistency led me to question the purpose of my research. In fact, I was moving in circles, and I do not know when I will complete my research work.

All participants agreed that such training enabled them to have good insights, especially in research methods, which is a strong foundation in research work, as explained by a participant IGSP1 from the hard pure discipline.

The Directorate of Research and Graduate Training organizes cross-cutting or short-term training like research methodology, data analysis, scholarly writing, philosophy, and professional technical training on molecular and laboratory analysis procedures tailored to certain students, which are very vital. Training will help me to be proud as a Makerere University alumni.

Most of the participants in this study agreed that they were mentored, though the levels differed. Whereas some participants shared that they had received guidance beyond the boundaries of academics, others had not been assisted outside the academic borders. For instance, a participant IGSM4 from the hard applied discipline shared that:

Building a mentor-like relationship with a lecturer has been transformative. Their guidance goes beyond academics and helps shape my career path. All my perseverance is

attributed to mentorship I have received from my female lecturers.

Participants appreciated the mentorship they got from their supervisors, which enabled them to counter the challenges in the academic environment in a foreign country. They acknowledged that their mentors were just more than their guides. They were their friends and advocates for their success. In support, a participant IGSM4 said that:

Beyond research guidance, my supervisor opened doors to networking opportunities. They introduced me to prominent researchers in the field, encouraged my participation in conferences, and supported my collaboration efforts. This mentorship extended beyond the laboratory and into building a professional network. They really encourage us to persevere especially in the male-dominated disciplines in which we are.

International graduate students acknowledged the importance of study resources as part of their experiences at Makerere University. Participants noted that libraries provide access to academic materials such as books and journal articles that support research, while labs offer hands-on learning and experimentation crucial for the science disciplines. For instance, a participant IGSP4 from the soft pure discipline opined that:

The extensive collection of academic journals and books in the university library greatly enriched my research. I have access to online databases and e-books which all make it convenient for me to gather information for my research work. You know am pursuing a PhD only by research.

Conversely, a participant IGSP3 said,

Some of the laboratory tests I had to conduct needed state-of-the-art laboratories with specialized equipment, which are not available here. This was a big setback to my research work because I had to export samples to other countries which was challenging because I had to incur a lot of

costs, and yet the approval process was so bureaucratic.

Institutional experiences were part of the experiences of international graduate students at Makerere University. Institutional experiences refer to interactions, encounters, and situations that international graduate students undergo within the structure of Makerere University. These experiences are influenced and shaped by the structural elements and constraints present in the university. Among the institutional experience participants shared, the focus was on delays in communication and overwhelming bureaucratic processes. Delayed response by supervisors was also mentioned by international graduate students IGSM2, IGSM4, and IGSP3 as part of their experiences at Makerere University. Particularly, IGSP3 from the College of Health Sciences, a hard-applied discipline, noted,

When I submitted my proposal, it took two years to be approved. This disorganized my work plan because it extended the period of my study, making the course very costly for me. On top of that, my research work was delayed by approval from the ethical review board.

Relatedly, a participant (IGSP1) from the College of Natural Sciences, a hard pure discipline, stated

I understand that administrative processes can sometimes be complex. But the delays I have experienced have been impacting on my academic progress causing unnecessary stress. Specifically, I have encountered delays in registration and payments. I work in a university, but a student is not required for registration. Everything is online and handled by the department. But here you go every day, everywhere, the lines are long, then the system is off, your data is not migrated, and money was paid but not allocated. Oh my GOD!

All the Participants said that sometimes they missed important information due to the sluggish communication from the administration, and some had their scholarships expire before the

completion of their courses due to structural hindrances. Conclusively, participants lamented the delays in the university systems and activities, which affected their integration and stay at the university. Therefore, the university needs to consider what impacts the students' adjustment to academic preparedness to create a more supportive environment for international graduate students.

Accommodation

Accommodation was an essential international graduate student experience at Makerere University. From the participant's perspective, accommodation experiences refer to situations encountered by participants that relate to housing facilities within and outside the university. These housing facilities were typically located in proximity to campus. They were tailored to meet students' unique needs and preferences, offering various living arrangements, amenities, and support services to foster a conducive learning environment and a sense of community among students. All participants declared their experiences in securing a place to stay upon their arrival to Uganda. Though the university has a hall for postgraduate students, none of the participants was accommodated there immediately because this hall is full most of the time. Any student who wants accommodation they must book early and wait for whoever exits to replace him/her. For instance, a participant IGSM1 from the College of Business and Management, a soft applied discipline, said,

I am accommodated within the university's postgraduate hall of residence. The rooms are shared but fortunately, I am single, so sharing is not a problem for me. The biggest challenge is that washrooms are damaged and need serious repairs. However, the key advantage of having accommodation within is that you can interact with academic resources, fellow graduate students with whom we share a lot in common.

IGSP2 from the hard applied discipline reported;

Accommodation is a challenge to me. What the government provided to me after the exchange rate is not enough for transport, feeding, and accommodation. In the university's post graduates' hall of residence, international students pay 100 dollars for a double room and 150 dollars for a single room. However, security is safer in the university because there was a time I was attacked by thieves outside the university. Although outside, it is cheaper I pay for electricity and water. In the university you have access to all these utilities.

Some participants devised ways through which they could get cheaper accommodation outside the university. These included subletting rooms within other people's houses and other standalone units, which were slightly cheaper. These were achieved through social networks the students had formed in Uganda. A participant IGSP3 from the hard applied discipline said that:

Since I had been to Uganda before, I already had colleagues here. One of them helped me to get a house which is not so small but slightly cheaper in a relatively decent location not far from the university. You know I am a married man, sometimes my family comes to visit, and that is why I had to get a place where my privacy is assured.

IGSM3 from the soft pure discipline also shared;

Living in a student housing complex provided me with a sense of belonging. Fellow students surround me. Though they are not international students, I feel like having an instant support system even though the majority are undergraduates, and I am a graduate student, I enjoy their company.
Loneliness

Six of the participants mentioned that they had experienced loneliness during their studies at Makerere University, which resulted from missing family and friends, yet to others, loneliness was attributed to personal characteristics. For instance, IGSP1 from the

College of Natural Sciences, a hard pure discipline, opined

I am very lonely here. Sincerely, I miss my family. I call my wife from time to time at times every day. One day, I boarded a plane to return to my family, which was very expensive. Now I only make video calls to my wife and children.

On a different note, IGSP4 from the soft pure discipline reported:

I have established interpersonal relationships. I cannot say I feel lonely because there are Somalis here. I tend to establish relationships wherever I go. I have not felt lonely since I came to Makerere University.

Feeding

Six participants explained that feeding is an important component of their experience at Makerere University. They noted that feeding was essential for providing nourishment for physical and mental well-being, energy levels, and cultural integration. To this, IGSP3 from the hard applied discipline said, "I like the food here. It is healthier because it is fresh. I have adapted to it especially the vegetables that reduce cancer and provide energy to solve mental health problems in my academic work".

On the other hand, IGSP2 from the soft applied discipline reported;

At first, the food here was very challenging to me. I could not take the milk because it was smelly. Yet, milk is my major food because I have no time to cook. Besides, I do not know how to prepare food because I cannot even handle the knife. Eventually, I had to get someone to cook for me but after explaining to her how our dishes at home are prepared. The food here is not appetizing.

Weather

Six out of eight participants acknowledged the importance of pleasant weather as part of their experiences while studying at Makerere

University. They noted that the pleasant weather made it easier for them to adapt to their new surroundings, hence reducing stress related to extreme temperatures or adverse conditions. The weather also helped them to concentrate on their studies without the distraction of extreme cold or heat. As IGSP3 said,

"I like the weather in Uganda, it is the best in the world, it is comfortable because it is not too hot and not too cold which is a relief for me who comes from a more extreme weather".

Health Care Services

Availability and accessibility to health care services were identified as contributing to international graduate students' experiences at Makerere University. Five participants noted that health care was a critical area for international students' overall health and well-being while in a host country. Many international graduate students emphasized that they found the healthcare facilities to be very accommodating to international students. For example, a participant IGSP4 from the soft pure discipline intimated:

During the tough period of COVID-19, I needed medical attention because I was fed up with things about self-medication that people were circulating on social media. People could write conspiracies and theories that I thought were ridiculous and could not make sense. So, with that confusion, I felt like I could not handle the fact the media was piling up in my head with false and true stories. So, I decided to seek medical help from the university hospital. Unfortunately, when I reached there, a drug was prescribed for me, and I was advised to go and buy it from a nearby pharmacy.

IGSP3 from the College of Health Sciences, a hard applied discipline, added, "I had concerns about health care access when I first arrived. But the university guided us through the healthcare system, which made it much easier and simpler. Now I am not worried; even if I fall sick, I feel well taken care of".

Attaining a Study Visa

Five study participants shared that attaining a study visa was another experience during their study at Makerere University. They noted that inevitably, they had to apply for and often renew their study visas to fit in the migration guidelines in the host country. However, participants lamented the way they suffered with the immigration process. IGSM2 from the College of Natural Sciences, a hard pure discipline attested;

Getting a student pass is awful. It is annoying and stressful. My admission is for two years but the visa is for one year at a cost of 100 dollars each year, why not for two years to balance with the course duration. You must buy those sim cards of airtel, or MTN but when your pass expires you are disconnected. My visa expired in June and the program expires in October, but I still must pay. I feel like dodging the whole process but how can I?

On the contrary, IGSM4 from the College of Veterinary Medicine, Animal Resources and Biosecurity, a hard applied shared;

I got a recommendation letter from the Dean of Students' office to the immigration office to settle my details there. However, some students are not aware of what they are supposed to do, and the immigration process also challenges them.

Financial Experiences

Financial experiences were also identified as another experience by international graduate students at Makerere University. Financial experiences encompass the various monetary expenses students undertake during their studies at the university. These include tuition, accommodation costs, feeding, transportation, utilities, and scholarly materials expenses. From the participants' voices, the financial experiences of international graduate students vary significantly depending on various factors, including their mother country, the specific field they pursue, and their individual circumstances. Five participants experienced fluctuations in

currency exchange, which impacted their expenses. The fluctuations in currency exchange rates impacted the amount of money international students need to cover their expenses. For instance, a participant IGSP2 from the College of Education and External Studies a softly applied discipline, stated that:

You do not have a scholarship for yourself or even for your family. And here you cannot run to anyone asking for tuition or even upkeep. These challenges I am facing can also influence my studies because as a family man, when my children, do not have a meal in the house I cannot concentrate on my study. I will focus twice, I will think now they do not have something, and I am here in the library, I cannot be stable.

Though international students often pay high tuition fees, most of the participants said that they relied on scholarships to cover their expenses. However, some sponsored themselves, as indicated below. IGSM4, from the hard applied discipline of pursuing a master's degree in microbiology and on self-sponsorship, faced the challenge of high tuition fees. She must make ends meet, so, she secured a part-time research assistantship from her university which provided her with a stipend but also valuable research experience. She said;

I had to carefully plan my budget to accommodate the substantial expenses related to my education. I learnt to budget precisely and prioritize expenses while still maintaining my academic performance, that way, I can meet my expenses.

Participants had diverse views and experiences on living expenses. All participants unanimously agreed that adapting to the cost of living in a new country is a common challenge that requires developing strategies and financial habits to make their educational journey affordable and enjoyable, as substantiated by IGSM2 from the hard pure discipline who reported that:

The cost of living in Uganda is not that high. But, still managing rent, groceries,

transportation, and other daily expenses in a foreign country is a big challenge that is why I had to find ways of reducing my living costs while still maintaining a decent quality of life.

Finally, the participants in this study acknowledged that financial support was essential for international graduate students to support their education and improve their financial status, reducing stress.

Transport

International graduate students also shared their experience with transport. They believed transport played a vital role in facilitating their mobility, integration, and overall well-being, for example, in their everyday activities like shopping, health care appointments, and social events. IGSM1 confirmed that:

Boda-bodas are a fast means of transport but are a security risk as they involve reckless driving and unprofessional conduct. The taxis over delay on the road leading to time wastage and disruption of our plans. Being unused to the home routes makes life difficult because the taxis can use a route of your choice and you get really lost and end up spending more to reach your destination.

Language Barrier

Participants expressed the language barrier as a crucial component of their experiences at Makerere University. They noted that it was vital to understand the common language used in the host country to connect with nearby people and better comprehend the host culture. When international students fail to understand language, it may lead to problems in understanding the taught content in the classroom, affecting speech and confidence and leading to academic stress. Along this line, IGSP1 from the College of Natural Sciences, a hard pure discipline, reported that:

In my struggle I do not only face academic challenges, but it is also a language barrier. Many colleagues switch to local language even in discussion and leave us behind. You cannot understand what they are saying.

Lecturers also teach effectively but at times give examples in a language I cannot conceive of.

Discrimination

Some international graduate students at Makerere University also experienced discrimination. Discrimination refers to the unfair or prejudicial treatment of people based on characteristics such as race, gender, age, colour, or sexual orientation that can serve as a significant source of stress and difficulty for many international graduate students in their attainment of a quality life experience in the host institution. IGSP3 from the College Health Sciences, a hard-applied discipline, remarked that:

There was discrimination in some areas. For example, there was a nine-month training in expertise in publishing in Spain, but it was specifically for Ugandan citizens. All scholarships they write only Ugandans, preference should be to all. I do not blame Makerere University even British Universities do it, but there should be inclusivity for international students.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings uncovered the immense experiences international graduate students go through at Makerere University which are discussed under two themes namely, non-academic, and academic experiences. As regards the non-academic experiences, the findings indicate that international graduate students have diverse experiences with accommodation, loneliness, health care facilities, financial issues, and attaining student's visas which are both positive and negative. This is consistent with the findings which show that international graduate students must fit in a new and unfamiliar environment with its new demands (Hussain and Shen (2019); Kim et al. (2019).

The findings revealed that, international graduate students often experience unique challenges in finding suitable accommodation with the local housing market. Yet, literature shows that international graduate students often look for

well-maintained facilities with essential amenities (Lambert & Usher, 2013; Nwokedi, 2015). It was also established that many international graduate students rely on university-provided accommodation initially and later explore off campus options. This creates a need for the provision of accurate information on accommodation to international graduate students as they make decisions as regards their accommodation. According to the findings, proximity to the university is crucial for convenience as reflected by participants that it can impact costs as well. This finding aligns with other scholars who emphasize that accommodation experience of international graduate students varies depending on the locality of their university, the housing opportunities available and their personal inclinations (McGregor et al. (2022); Nwokedi (2015).

The findings found that loneliness is a genuine aspect of the international graduate students' experience. Being far from home, immersed in a new culture and grappling with academic demands creates a sense of isolation. However, participants indicated that many find solace in forming connections with fellow students, participating in cultural events, and actively associating with local communities. This finding is supported by scholars (Menziez and Baron (2014) and Moglen (2017) who revealed that when international graduate students participate in various activities, form linkages with colleagues and utilize the social media which increases their social interaction and minimizes their loneliness. The study also found that whenever international graduate students participated in social activities, they expanded their social networks with other students. Additionally, participating in social activities promoted a cultural exchange between local students and international students which reduced cultural shock and levels of loneliness. This finding agrees with Rose-Redwood (2010) and Zhou (2010) who revealed that participation in social activities such as sports, parties, created a good opportunity for international graduate

students to build friendship and interaction with other people.

This study found that experiences of participants with the available food stuffs varied widely. Some embraced the opportunity to try diverse foods while others missed familiar dishes from their home country. Participants agreed that adjusting to local grocery options, dietary habits, and cooking practices is both challenging and rewarding. This finding confirms those of previous studies conducted by Hartwell et al. (2011) which indicated that international students have a tendency of maintaining their food culture, often by making traditional food on their own or sometimes eating together with fellow students from their home countries, and at times using ingredients they brought from home. Meanwhile, other scholars (Hartwell et al., 2011; O'Sullivan & Amirabdollahian, 2016) emphasized that taste was a factor prompting international students to seek familiar foods, a factor equally stressed by this study. Some participants considered their home food tastier than the local food, and explained that by providing their own traditional food, they maintained a good taste.

According to (Koon & Mehdi, 2019), international graduate students often have diverse experiences with weather conditions, some find the climate drastically different from their home countries impacting their daily lives and mood. Adapting to new seasons, coping with extreme temperatures is a mix of adjustments, and for some a chance to experience weather patterns they have never encountered. Nonetheless, the study findings revealed that all participants were comfortable with Uganda's weather conditions which are intermittently warm and cool.

Soneta et al. (2021) found that international graduate students often encounter varied experiences with health care facilities. They argue that navigating a new health care system can be intimidating. That is why some may find the healthcare system efficient while others may face cultural differences in medical practices. This concurs with the findings of this study which revealed that some participants were satisfied with

the effectiveness of the medical system and the kind attitudes of staff. Most especially, they were satisfied with the smooth process of receiving health care. However, some were also dissatisfied with the long process of waiting in ques. This may require the hospital management to devise faster and more efficient ways of attending to sick students to avoid the long wait by students who are sick.

Based on these findings, visa attainment can also be a rollercoaster for international graduate students at Makerere University. Navigating complex application processes, anxiously waiting for approvals, and dealing with potential delays proved to be stressful. As some international graduate students share tales of relief and celebration upon securing a visa, others recount the challenges of uncertainty and the emotional toll of visa related hurdles. This concurs with findings which indicate that visa/ immigration issues are crucial given the fact that the legal status of many international students on temporary visas makes them vulnerable most especially during difficult times (Schartner, 2023).

Scholars (Alkandari, 2014; Bilas, 2016) observed that financial experiences of international graduate students vary widely depending on the country they are studying in, the cost of living in that location, the specific university or program and individual circumstances. They further indicate that tuition costs for international graduate students are often higher than those for domestic students. While some countries may offer scholarships or reduced tuition for international graduate students, but many international graduate students still face significant expenses (Bilas, 2016; Yakaboski et al., 2016). This agrees with the findings of this study which revealed that some international graduate students are on scholarships while others are self-sponsored. The findings further revealed that the cost of living, including accommodation for those participants who stay off campus, food, transportation, and other daily expenses are a major financial burden. The situation requires

international graduate students to create realistic budgets to account for their expenses to avoid financial crises during study.

Regarding academic experience, the findings in this study indicate that some international graduate students at Makerere University experienced the lecture room atmosphere differently. This finding affirms the argument made by Ren and Hagedorn (2012) and Ammigan et al. (2021) that international students' experiences are influenced by the individual student's previous experiences. In this study, some international graduate students revealed that at the beginning they struggled to cope with the new curriculum and the new teaching styles they encountered at Makerere University, but once they were used to these new ways, they enjoyed the learning process. Participants acknowledged the good student-staff interaction as the basis for their adjustment (Ammigan et al; 2021). From these findings, it appears the positive attitude of academic staff enhances the academic adjustment of international graduate students at Makerere University.

On the other hand, the findings of this study indicate that not all participants had positive interaction with the academic staff. Some participants revealed that they found some academic staff to be impatient, others made judgmental comments about the participants, while others took very long to give them feedback whenever they submitted their research work an issue that contributed to the over delay of some participants on the course. In addition, such kind of behavior resulted in a feeling of exclusion and isolation on the part of the student. Once international graduate students felt excluded, they became lonely and home sick, hence perpetuating their vulnerability.

The findings further revealed that graduate programs often involve extensive research, independent study, and critical thinking. This implies that international graduate need time to familiarize to the higher level of academic rigor and the expectations of the program as observed by Choi (2006) that international graduate

students need time in seminars for open dialogue to share feelings perspectives and experiences to contribute meaningfully to the culture of the program. It was also found that international graduate students experience challenges when it comes to selecting research topics, conducting fieldwork in a new country, and navigating the academic writing style required. This finding is in line with the recommendations of Kumi-Yeboah and James (2014) that faculty members should adapt different strategies to help international graduate students to develop mechanisms that reduce the academic challenges faced in their quest to adapt to the demands of a new academic environment, this study also revealed that participants experienced lecture presentations differently. Where assume participants were dissatisfied with the language mix by lecturers during lecture presentations which was an obstacle to their adjustment, others had no problem with it. This finding corresponds to the fact that language affects international students' grade performance (Ghalayini, 2014; Adams, 2017).

The experiences of international graduate students regarding the availability of study resources can vary significantly based on the institution and the country they are studying in (Karkar-Esperat, 2018). The findings of this study show that participants have access to libraries and digital resources which eases their access to the latest study materials. Participants acknowledged that they find these resources comprehensive and easily accessible for their research and study needs which is key in academia as emphasized by (Ammigan et al., 2021) that the academic performance of international students and their level of institutional satisfaction is to some extent influenced by availability of study infrastructure. However, it was found that in some fields of study such as sciences, engineering or medicine which require access to specialized laboratories and research facilities, participants experienced shortage of some equipment. The situation impacted the time completion of their research projects. This necessitates the university to have

modern infrastructure to attract more international graduate students in the science fields.

CONCLUSION

The findings revealed that those international graduate students at Makerere University had experiences such as those related to scholarly, institutional barriers, accommodation, loneliness, feeding, weather, health care services, attaining a study visa, financial assistance, transport, language barrier, and discrimination. This study concludes that those international graduate students had non-academic and academic experiences at Makerere University, which were both positive and negative. Beyond rigorous academic pursuits, international students navigate cultural nuances, build diverse networks, and contribute to a vibrant campus life. Positive experiences presented opportunities to international graduate students at Makerere University, and these included establishing alliances and synergies with fellow students and staff, which promoted cultural exchange and enhanced their adjustment and course completion. Those international graduate students also had positive experiences with study resources such as the library and the internet, which enhanced their satisfaction levels and enabled them to succeed in their academic pursuits.

Regarding their negative experience, many of the participants were staying off campus, which had cost implications in terms of rental fees, transport, and other daily living costs, which perpetuated their vulnerability as they strived to adjust to the social and academic environment. They also struggled to cope with the curriculum and teaching styles, which were unfamiliar. They faced difficulties in doing their research projects. They experienced a language barrier due to the language mix lectures during lecture presentations, which impacted their adjustment to the academic environment. Such negative experiences impacted their adjustment and course completion, perpetuating their vulnerability.

Limitations and Areas for Further Research

This study had some limitations that need to be considered. The findings in this study were generated using an interpretive paradigm. Much as the findings can be replicated to similar contexts, the findings are not generalisable to all international graduate students in higher education institutions in different contexts. There is therefore needed to conduct the same study with a larger sample and using different methodologies.

This research was conducted at Makerere University and so it is limited in terms of scope. A broader geographical scope on the experiences and how international graduate students are supported in the different universities in Uganda needs to be investigated. This will allow to generalize the findings to a bigger population.

There is also need to conduct a comparative study with private universities as this would provide interesting findings regarding the experiences of international graduate students and how they are supported in the different universities. This will help universities borrow best practices, which will improve the experiences of international graduate students in higher education institutions in Uganda.

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