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FEATURE

**Transition Experience of Graduate Students in an
Asian Multicultural Institution: A Case Study**

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Abstract. *Success in higher education is a complex matter. Some students experience challenges in their transition process from a secular to a faith-based multicultural institution. There is a need to identify the ways to facilitate the transition in a faith-based international environment. This qualitative case study describes the transition experiences of students who never studied in but are currently studying in a faith-based institution. The study is built upon the Socialization theory (Weidman et al., 2001), which helps in understanding the adjustment process to a new academic environment. Data collection comprised interviews, observation, and documents. Data was transcribed, coded, and grouped by categories and themes using thematic coding. The recurring themes revealed challenges in academic, social, and spiritual aspects. Several coping strategies were mentioned, like personal initiative, familial, collegial, faculty, administrative, and communal support. For implementation, it was recommended a digital orientation kit translated into different languages, assignment of mentors, and organization of study groups for the new students. The study also proffers several recommendations for further research.*

Keywords: transition, socialization theory, academic adjustment, graduate students, coping strategies

Introduction

Postgraduate education gained the interest of students, whether their education occurs in their country or abroad. The transition process in a multicultural environment from undergraduate to postgraduate is not facile (Weidman et al., 2001). Many graduate students experience difficulties in adjustment during the first

few months of the first school year (West, 2012) due to the unprecedented diversity of students at the postgraduate level (Bunney, 2017). These difficulties can appear at personal, social, or professional levels (Heussi, 2012; Vekkaila et al., 2013). Besides the challenge of transitioning to a multicultural environment, some students face challenges transitioning from secular to faith-based schools. Prescott and Hellstén (2005) say that transition “generally indicates the progression from the familiar to the unknown and involves the adoption of new cultural, social, and cognitive challenges” (p. 76).

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to describe the transition experiences of Christian Ph.D. and MA students studying for the first time in a multicultural faith-based higher education (HE) institution. The study proposes to identify the challenges and the coping mechanisms to the new international environment. Further, it aims to describe how the HE policies and practices may impact students in transition.

Review of the Literature

The transition experience of graduate students in multicultural settings includes challenges and difficulties. The support systems typically involve components such as providing orientations, introducing surrogate families, and supporting new students by old students (Bunney, 2017; Mears et al., 2015; Rodríguez et al., 2019; Twale et al., 2016). When students arrive in a new educational institution, they face a variety of transition experiences positively or negatively (Mears et al., 2015; Weidman et al., 2001). These may be related to academic norms (Weidman & Stein, 2003), values, beliefs, and attitudes of students (Stein & Weidman, 1989); multiculturalism adaptation (Yusupova et al., 2015); students’ personal needs (Asthana et al., 2016), language (Wa-Mbaleka & Ryszewski, 2012); psychological, cultural, or educational implication (Ota, 2013; Pasha & Munaf, 2013; Singh et al., 2017); religious practices of the environment (Wa-Mbaleka, P et al., 2015); and the teaching style (Khandaghi & Farasat, 2011).

Challenges

Transition students vary widely in their initial reactions and adaptive responses to their new environment. The first year demands their ability to quickly adapt to certain cultural places, with academic, linguistic, interpersonal, psychological, and racial differences (Wa-Mbaleka & Ryszewski, 2012). Academic expectations pose a set of challenges, surprises, feelings of being overwhelmed by the level of knowledge, critical thinking, and writing skills demanded, often intensified by the language barrier (Mears et al., 2015; Twale et al., 2016). Some students in their first semester or first year are unwilling or do not recognize that they need support. Others are shocked by non-academic issues such as climate differences, unfamiliar food, homesickness, communication difficulties, or lack of social support (Bunney, 2017; Schreiner, 2013). Cultural, social, and psychological adjustments are

necessary (Pasha & Munaf, 2013; Singh et al., 2017). Language barriers can lead to obstacles in all facets of student life (Rodríguez et al., 2019; Twale et al., 2016). Therefore, learning to make successful transitions is essential for the successful completion of a HE degree. Often, students who choose to withdraw from a graduate program leave during the transition time.

Coping Strategies

Schreiner (2020) identified five distinctive features of successful transition strategies according to the students: having growth opportunities, applying coping skills to navigate their transition, believing that the needed support network was available to them to transition successfully, accessing needed resources, and achieving significant personal growth during the transition. The concept of support is vital, not only academically (Yusupova et al., 2015), but also regarding relationships and emotional and psychological aspects (Schreiner, 2020). Providing students with information, resources, and feedback allows them to navigate through transition with motivation and proactive coping skills (Schreiner, 2020; Schreiner et al., As Schreiner (2020) states, the construct of thriving provides a new and more expansive perspective of student success as students move through changes in positive ways, being confident and equipped for the future.

Orientations

Orientations are methods of universities for facilitating international student transitions. They base orientations on the concept of framing, socialization, and institutional support for facilitating students' adaptation in a multicultural environment (Gaikwad et al., 2019; Louis & Schreiner, 2020). Typically, the orientation covers the aspects of daily campus life, giving information about the library, admissions office, department or finance office, cafeteria, or classrooms. They are for all new students, providing an overview of the campus culture, resources, and services. In addition, students benefit from the department or program orientation which introduces the students to department faculty, personnel, and program resources (Nelson, Vetter, & Vetter, 2020). The orientation also helps students understand the expectations (Schreiner, 2020) and how they fit in as students (Weidman & Stein, 2003). First impressions, whether they feel welcomed and supported or not, impact students' perceptions regarding the program (Louis & Schreiner, 2020; Weidman & Stein, 2003) and how they interact with faculty for obtaining resources, guidance, and assistance (Schreiner, Martinez, Drumm, & Keetch, 2020). In some cases, international students need surrogate families (McLachlan & Justice, 2009) or support groups (Schreiner et al., 2020). Non-traditional teaching as part of academic support can also help the transition process (Bunney, 2017).

As presented, graduate students have trouble transitioning during the first school year when starting a new academic program. It is essential to learn how to

provide support during the transition as students strive to adjust to new educational environments. The theoretical framework of this study was built upon the Socialization theory (Weidman et al., 2001). Socialization is seen as a process people go through for learning “to adopt the norms, values, and attitudes, of the professional role” (Stein & Weidman, 1989, p. 5). Socialization happens in four stages: anticipatory, formal, informal, and personal stage (Weidman et al., 2001).

The topic under examination was explored through three research questions, focusing on the students’ experiences during the transition. They are:

1. What are the transition experiences of graduate students in a faith-based educational institution?
2. What strategies do graduate students initiate to deal with transition?
3. How does a faith-based educational institution respond to the transition issues of graduate students?

Methodology

The present study used a qualitative methodology. Corbin and Strauss (2015) state that qualitative methodology is the choice when the goal is to understand a phenomenon or obtain information hard to attain through quantitative research. Therefore, qualitative methodology is the choice in this research, fitting the purpose of the study.

Research Design

The research design of this study is a case study as the purpose was to understand the transition experiences of graduate students studying in a faith-based institution for the first time. A case study design is suitable when the focus of the study is answering how and why questions (Yin, 2018). It is also the chosen research design of this study since the focus is to answer how graduate students adjust to transition in a new international education environment. The type of the case study is a holistic single case study (Gaikwad, 2017), as it aimed to describe and analyze the transition experiences of graduate students in a bounded system, with a limited number of participants and time to conduct the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Research Setting

The selected institution is an international HE from Asia. It offers a variety of MA and Ph.D. programs in education, theology, public health, and business. The students, faculty, and administrators represent different countries from all continents and create together a puzzle of multiculturalism.

Sampling

The participants of the study represent three groups: students, faculty, and administrators. The aim was to collect data to understand the transition process and the coping strategies used to facilitate this transition. Seven students enrolled in the HE institution, three faculty members, and four administrators willing to participate composed the participants' group of the study. Purposive sampling was applied since the study aimed to obtain data from those participants with intense transition experiences (Creswell, 2012). The selection criteria were as follows:

1. Student. Must be a student in the institution for at least one year, earned a previous degree from a secular university, and is willing to participate. He/she is studying for the first time in this type of faith-based education institution.
2. Faculty. Must have at least two years' work experience in a faith-based institution, has responsibilities in the mentoring program, and be willing to participate.
3. Administrator. Must be representing administrative and academic and is willing to participate.

Tables 1 and 2 present the profile of the participants, students, faculty, and administrators.

Students' Profile

Participants' Code	Previous School	Number of Years at Current School	Degree Pursuing
Ms. C	Private school & College	4	MpH
Ms. B	Private school & Govt College	3	MDiv
Ms. R1	Private School & Govt college	3	MpH
Mr. H	Govt School & College	2	MA Education
Ms. L	Catholic school & College	2	MDiv
Ms. R2	Catholic school & Govt College	2	MBA
Mr. E	Private school & College	1	MBA

Faculty and Administrators' Profile

Participants' Code	Number of Years in Service	Faculty/Administrator
Mrs. P	13	Faculty
Mrs. H	4	Faculty
Mr. C	2	Faculty
Mr. D	15	Administrator
Mr. R	4	Administrator
Mr. B	3	Administrator
Mr. G	2	Administrator

Data Collection

Data collection methods comprised 14 interviews and 14 occasions for observations. The interviews were conducted with students, faculty, and

administrators. All participants received detailed information about the study, interviews, privacy issues, and the allocated time. Each interview session lasted from 30 to 45 minutes. The observations consisted of noting how the selected participants involved themselves in different activities. Their behavior toward academic, social, spiritual activities and interactions with other students, faculty, and administrators were observed and recorded. Based on the Weidman et al. (2001) Socialization Framework, Petre developed an observation guide (see Table 3). The items cover the four stages of the socialization framework, each item having four options (4 = high evident; 3 = evident; 2 = low evident; 1 = not evident).

Table 3
Observation Guide

Stages	Awareness of expectations	Focus of observation	Degree of Evidence			
			4	3	2	1
Anticipatory Stage	Of role acquisition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior • Attitudes • Cognitive expectations • Roles • Procedures • Vocabulary 	Students participate in the orientation program. Students participate in social activities. Students participate in spiritual programs. Students follow the expressed rules. Students ask questions to clarify different aspects. Students ask for help to complete the registration process. Students interact with other students. Students manifest positive attitudes in interactions. Students properly use words in communication. Students follow the indicated procedures. Students interact with their mentors/supervisors. Teachers, supervisors, and mentors offer information to students. Administration personnel offer guidance to students.				
Formal Stage	Of role acquisition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal instruction • Acquisition of knowledge • Formal role expectations • Opportunities that are not generally available to the public • Become familiar faces in the program • Looking for concrete information on normative standards, rewards, sanctions • Completing formal examinations 	Students manifest a positive attitude in the class. Students ask meaningful questions. Students offer qualified responses. Students accept different roles in-class activities. Students ask if there are rewards in the class. Students ask if there are penalties in the class. Students demonstrate academic competency. Teachers/mentors offer qualified support. Teachers/mentors express class requirements. Teachers/mentors are available for students outside of class.				
Informal Stage	Of role acquisition <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behavior • Informal role expectations • Interaction with others 	Students react according to their roles. Students communicate their academic and personal anxieties with others. Students express their relief after the academic social issues are resolved. Students express solidarity with other students. Students show initiative in their involvement in projects/ programmed activities. Students have positive interactions with other students. Students have positive interactions with teachers. Students have positive interactions with other academic personnel.				
Personal Stage	Of role internalized <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role is internalized • Professional identity • Reconciling the previous self-image and the new image • Accept a value orientation • Resolve any conflict impeding a total role transformation • Accommodate the required role with his/her personal needs, attitudes, and role requirements 	Students regularly participate in social activities. Students regularly participate in spiritual programs. Students accept different responsibilities as part of their roles. Students help other students. Students settle conflicts successfully. Students are successful in their academic program. Students are successful in their roles. Students collaborate with their teachers in research. Students publish articles. Students present papers at conferences.				

Note: Developed by Petre G.E., based on the Weidman, Twale, and Stein (2001) Socialization Framework

Data Analysis

The data were collected, transcribed, coded, and grouped under themes. The researchers decided to personally transcribe the data to get immersed in data

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(Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Interviewees received pseudonyms to assure confidentiality of responses.

Trustworthiness

Using different sources and methods for data collection (students, faculty, administrators, interviews, observations), member-check (the participants checked and confirmed the transcribed interviews), and informed consent signed by the participants, ensured credibility. Providing a thick and rich description of the research design, implementation, and results, warranted dependability. Data triangulation and a detailed description of the methodology contributed to confirmability. The researchers provided information about the research setting and participants.

Reflexibility

Qualitative research requires the reflexivity of the researcher. Biases, personal agendas, individual values, attitudes, and theoretical perspectives can influence the researcher. In this study, the researchers have also experienced the transition from secular education to a faith-based environment. This aspect could constitute a bias because some facets of the findings can be lost. However, the researchers had the experience of transition in secondary school and college, a fact that did not influence data collection and analysis. Further, the researchers organized debriefing sessions after conducting the interviews to prevent personal bias issues.

Ethical Considerations

The Ethics Review Board committee of the HE institution where the researchers were studying approved the study. That was conducted ethically by considering several aspects. The participants learned about the purpose and significance of the study in the educational field. In addition, they were assured about the confidentiality of their identity and data and received pseudonyms. The participants knew the necessary information about the study and signed the informed consent. They were treated with respect, having the possibility to accept or not to participate in the study.

Results

We present the findings of this study by themes based on the research questions. For the first research question (What are the transition experiences of graduate students in a faith-based educational institution?), the emerging themes highlighted the difficulties and challenges of the adaptation process, the academic and social relationships, and the spiritual experiences. Here are the details that we found.

Difficulties Challenge

Participants received overwhelming information from the orientation program, as some of them were not fluent English speakers. In opposition, a challenge came from learning another language in the English Center, as there, the students did not receive enough information about their programs. For Ms. R1, the “biggest challenge was the English Center.” Ms. B shared: “Honestly, I almost gave up. I prayed to the Lord: whether you give me a sponsor or not, I don’t care. I wanted to go back home . . . but, finally, I passed the test”. English was a barrier in making new friends, being perceived as a difficulty student experienced in their transition. As such, it led to emotional issues: “It was hard for me. I cried from April to December”, says Ms. B, while Ms. L experienced homesickness.

Some difficulties were related to housing and the lack of cafeteria: “They put me to apartment B, along the highway. I suffered from great noise. And there is no cafeteria [on the campus], so, here you need to cook by yourself” (Ms. R1). For Ms. B, some behaviors are different from those from her country: “Here, everything is slow, and people like delaying [in responses/ interventions].” Aspects as hugging and coming late to class were shocking aspects: “They were late for class for a half-hour or 20 minutes. I don’t know how to accept this . . . this is rude in my culture” (Ms. B).

Academic Relationship Experiences

A multicultural educational environment involves not only challenges and difficulties but also attractive and good aspects. In this environment, students experienced the opportunity to freely express themselves, developing positive attitudes, valuing in-class interaction and integration of faith and values in teaching, building wholesome relationships with professors and classmates, and receiving individual help from faculty who were role models for students. The participants expressed their regret for not having such education before, aspects recalled by teachers too: “They are grateful for the integration of faith and learning that probably was unheard off on their situation” (Ms. P.).

Social Relationship Experiences

Besides academic relationships, the participants experienced what friendship in a multicultural environment is. They received support from peers and friends when financial, health and homesick issues appeared. They developed positive attitudes about people and campus life, appreciating people’s variety of gifts and talents. They embraced new practices and valued the relationships between the students’ services department and community leaders. “I encouraged them to join the community; and, when they feel that the community is accepting and supporting them, they are part of it, and the transition becomes easier” (Mr. B.).

Spirituality on Campus

In addition to appreciating the values taught in classrooms, students were involved in religious ministry programs as offered by the institution and were willing to adopt good religious family practices. For some of them, Sabbath practices were diverse and pleasing. For others, coming from more conservative countries, it was shocking to see some clothes and gadgets that other people took to church. They were surprised to learn about some practices: “I saw people going to the mall on Sabbath, and I was like, you know . . . this is just like shocking to me” (Ms. L). However, beyond these practices, students in transition lived reinforcing moments when people prayed for them:

I felt this campus like heaven. I heard worship songs everywhere, my neighbor playing the violin; so, that’s good praise. When I had some problems, many people came to my house and prayed for me. Even before the test, the English test. Before that time, my neighbors came to pray. So, that’s wonderful. It’s not in my culture someone to come, and pray for me, holding my hands. (Mr. H)

After discovering the students in transition experiences with difficulties, challenges, and other good experiences, the study looked for coping strategies. Thus, the second research question (What strategies do graduate students initiate to deal with transition?) helped researchers explore the participants’ actions. Here are the details under this theme.

Coping Strategies

The findings showed a variety of coping strategies such as personal initiative or familial, collegial, faculty, administrative, and communal support. Regarding aspects of registration, payment, and enrollment for courses, students asked for help from the administration. In academic matters, they enlisted the help of teachers, being open to express their desires and needs. In their transition orientation, students received help from their community, friends, and neighbors, learning where and when to go shopping and other personal needs. “Community leaders,” said Mr. D, “can give the one-on-one type of adjustment opportunities. The community leader provides the first four meals when the new students arrive on campus”.

The participants mentioned that they chose to manifest good attitudes: thinking and acting positively, being open to ask for help, sharing thoughts with family (close or far), and experiencing the power of praying with other people. Doing different things together with other people helped them in the process of transition. For Ms. L, the family was of great support:

We talk on the phone, my grandfather sings in French hymns, and I sing with him. And we pray together. When he sings, it brings peace to me. I listen to him singing; it maybe little, but it keeps me going. (Ms. L)

Students in transition to a faith-based institution faced challenges and identified coping strategies as presented. Through the third research question (How does a faith-based educational institution respond to the transition issues of graduate students?), the focus of the study moved from students to the institution. What form took the institutional support for facilitating a fast and smooth transition of these students? The findings showed diverse areas in which students received support, making their adaptation to a multicultural environment possible.

Institutional Support

An international HE institution has a variety of activities and interventions to facilitate students' adjustment to the new environment. The support came in a formal and informal format. An orientation program, for instance, is an official method to facilitate students' adaptation. The Vice President for Students Services office has the role of taking care of the new students, showing interest in knowing students' educational background, and encouraging their involvement in different in-campus academic, social, and spiritual activities. The informal support comes in various ways, as the personnel help on non-formal occasions.

Even if the HE institution provides formal and informal support, facilitating students' transition, the participants recommended some activities to improve that assistance. A first recommendation was to offer a digital orientation kit translated into different languages. As such, the new students would know from the beginning what the expectations are. "I am thinking to produce an orientation kit, a small package with the necessary information, in all the language like Korean, Japanese . . . in various languages" (Mr. B). Another recommendation was for faculty. They may adopt a new single student and assure mentors to assist new students in transition: "I think that the main job of a professor/faculty here is to mentor people. We are not here just to give them books" (Mr. C). The last recommendation was to organize study groups for new students to create an atmosphere of group support where students feel accepted, understood, and helped. "At the beginning of the year, I try to organize them into study groups," said Mrs. R, passionate about making the transition smoothly through study groups activities.

Discussion

In the process of understanding the experiences of students in the transition from non-faith-based to faith-based educational institutions, the socialization theory (Stein & Weidman, 1989) and the transition framework (Weidman et al., 2001) guided the study. The findings showed that Ph.D. and MA students went through all four stages of transition, based on personal and institutional characteristics (Twale et al., 2016). Students look in the anticipatory stage to understand the behaviors, attitudes, and vocabulary practiced in the school. They also learn what roles, expectations, and procedures are required. At this level, students become aware that they must adjust some ideas and behaviors to achieve

the school requirements and to be successful. They know why they chose that institution: “I came here to have the best training, to be a leader in my church” (Ms. L).

In the formal stage, students in transition observe how older students report themselves to the academic requirements and cope with different roles adequately. Through interactions, the new students search for solutions and learn from others, being preoccupied with their professional development: “Here, you get the chance to interact with teachers more. And you know, ask for clarification if you need” (Mr. E). The informal stage finds students in transition learning through social interactions about how to handle different roles and expectations. “I asked a lot with professors, friends and other people, how to do this? I have this problem, what should I do?” (Ms. B). The last stage was achieved by those who internalized their new roles, finding a professional identity, and keeping balance in their academic, social, and emotional life. “Here, I found a model. I want to be like this professor and to change my workplace like this” (Mr. H).

The results of the study showed that transition is not an easy process. Students go through the transition stages facing different challenges based on their characteristics and institutional features (Twale et al., 2016). In line with the present study, research shows that challenges appear at personal, social, and professional levels (Heussi, 2012; Vekkaila et al., 2013), as students need a balanced way of adjustment. In an international environment, the transition challenges can have their roots in the cultural background as students come from different countries (Bunney, 2017; Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2015). The transition can be more or less challenging, based on the cultural background. In addition, language challenges can affect students’ adaptation (Twale et al., 2016; Wa-Mbaleka & Ryszewski, 2012) as English is not their native language. Commensurating with the skills students have in learning a new language is their stress. Transitioning to another kind of religious environment with different programs and practices may be another stress factor. However, for some people, spiritual practices are a modality of coping with transition and adjustment in a new environment, as religious communities provide support during adjustment to a new environment (Nelson et al., 2020; Wa-Mbaleka et al., 2015).

Adding to the already mentioned challenges, students in transition can struggle with academic adjustment (Gardner, 2008; Heussi, 2012; Weidman & Stein, 2003; Weidman et al., 2001; West, 2012); either the requirements are on a higher level or at a lower level compared with their previous schools. Personal values, beliefs, and attitudes may contribute to the transition of students in a multicultural environment (Stein & Weidman, 1989), positively or negatively, according to their background. A positive attitude facilitates a smooth transition and adjustment in a new environment, irrespective of the challenges encountered (Schreiner, 2020). The experiences of students’ transition in a multicultural setting require assistance from faculty members (Gardner, 2008; Yusupova et al., 2015). Therefore, international

educational institutions should provide mentoring programs and mentors to assist students in the process of adjustment to a multicultural environment (Schreiner et al., 2020).

Conclusion

Personal and institutional characteristics are significant in a smooth transition to a new educational environment. With interactive orientation programs, mentoring, academic help, study groups, faculty and student positive relationships, friends, and family support, students in transition can experience fewer difficulties and challenges. In this qualitative case study, some realms appeared as part of the transition from secular to faith-based institutions. The domains are personal, academic, cultural, religious, and institutional. The results of the study covered the four stages of social theory. It showed that, in the transition process, these steps are complete when achieving the level of an independent graduate student.

Several recommendations came to the surface in this study. For administrators, it was to organize orientation programs for both English Center students and those starting their academic programs, preparing printed materials in different languages with all the necessary information. Additionally, the participants recommended for faculty to plan regular meetings, develop mentoring programs, identify the educational background of the students, and organize students in home groups. When the groups have people with cultural diversity and experiences, there are positive outcomes and interactions. Further studies may investigate the experiences of non-denominational students in the transition to faith-based institutions and the transition of denominational faculty teaching for the first time in faith-based HE institutions.

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