

A Light at the End of the Tunnel: An autoethnography of an international student in North America

Merab Mushfiq

York University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, North America has witnessed a tremendous growth in the enrollment of international students in higher education. Research shows that international students face various challenges and struggle to adjust in a new environment. They often experience stress, anxiety, loneliness, peer pressure, and financial issues, as well as, in some cases, forms of cultural, linguistic, and racial discrimination and inequities. This study explores the journey of an international student in North America while pursuing an undergraduate degree. Using autoethnography as a qualitative research method, I describe and systematically analyze my personal experiences as an international student. Through personal lived experiences and cultural differences, which intersect in ways that specifically speak to acculturative stress, oppression, language barriers, and academic challenges. These lived experiences and cultural differences intersect in ways that are often interconnected with social justice concerns. In conclusion, I call for providing more robust psychological, sociocultural, and academic support and services, which are crucial for international adjustment, stability and academic success. Additionally, I explain the importance of proper mentoring and peer support resources, which are necessary to navigate hurdles when transitioning into a new culture and academics, as well as in meeting everyday linguistic, social and practical challenges.

Introduction

The number of international students in USA and Canada has been increasing over the last decade. Most international students are enrolling from India, China, South Korea, Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Nigeria (Opendoors, 2022). There are several reasons for students to study abroad such as: a better quality of education; expanding professional networking; gaining better understanding of diverse culture and values; and to pursue overall opportunities to learn and grow personally, academically, and professionally. While there are many international students enrolled in North American higher educational institutions, the number is also increasing in other parts of the world, such as Australia, Europe, and China. International students are also increasing in developing countries despite any issues related to politics and economic structure (Cantwell et al, 2008). Previously, these students were viewed for development of institutions and for themselves (Barber et al, 1984) but now they are the source of contributing to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). These students also contribute to the diversity on the campus and in classrooms where they add diverse perspectives, bring awareness to the community about different cultural values, and financial gains to the institutions and host countries (Rao, 2017; Wu et al., 2015). Some international students become inspirations for their communities which attract more international students to host universities (Rao, 2017). Cross-cultural understanding and contribution by international students bring a unique opportunity for host communities and domestic students to understand international students' culture, values, traditions, and experience from a different lens (Rao, 2017).

Most international students fund themselves, where their family supports them financially, which generates revenue for institutes in terms of tuition and other fees (Wu et al, 2015). Since international students are usually a great resource of boosting the economy and bringing diverse experiences and backgrounds and it is becoming very competitive to attract international students continuously in higher education. It is important to meet their needs and

continuously improve their experiences (Deumert et al, 2005; Wu et al, 2015). This article focuses on a personal lived experience as an international student in North America and shed light on various challenges and learning experiences.

The research questions that are being unpacked in this study are given below:

1. What are the key challenges as an international student?
2. Did the challenges get better over time?
3. How was the role of the writing center and other support services being helpful along the way?

Using autoethnography as a research method, I describe and analyze my lived experiences during my undergraduate program. In conclusion, I offer recommendations that could be implied to improve international students' experiences and make smooth transition to a new culture and environment.

Methods

This study employs autoethnography which not only provides a context of autobiography but also connects it to the social, cultural, and political elements (Adams et al, 2015; Given, 2008, p.48). Autoethnography focuses on lived experiences which is a further step of providing of directly investigating an insider's perspective (Duncan, 2004). Autoethnography includes the analysis of lived experiences where one can engage in narrative research which can facilitate understanding and construction of new identity (Beijaard et al, 2004). Using autoethnography as a qualitative research method narrates the author's experience as an international student in North America can enhance our understanding of international students challenges and struggles in a new culture and environment. Additionally, highlighting the author's experiences and reflections through personal stories is a timely contribution to the literature.

Autoethnography felt perfect to me because it combined my interests in ethnography, social psychology of the self and role-taking, subjectivity and emotionality, face-to-face communication and interaction, writing as inquiry and for evocation, storytelling, and my social work orientation toward social justice and giving back to the community (Jones et al, 2013). In autoethnography, the researcher brings their "vulnerable self" which broadens the horizons of their lived experiences (Ellis, 2007). Using autoethnography in this study focuses on social injustice to bring awareness, improve conditions, provide support, and prevent future injustice for the members of the same group as author (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020).

A Start of a Journey

Growing up, I never thought that I would go to study abroad as an international student. I started my educational journey at the age of seventeen, I went to the United States for the undergraduate degree as an international student. I had a very different perception before coming to the states. My perception was all about meeting new people, making new friends, going out and exploring. The host university was beautiful, people seemed super friendly, and I just fell in love with the campus. The first couple of days were exciting before the orientation and then during the orientation, learned about campus and student services. The orientation was only for about two days and there was a lot of information packed in it. By the end of the day, most of the information I did not remember. Later, it was very hard for me to figure out all the services that were available. Since it was my first time being all by myself and no friends and family made it even harder to ask for help since everyone and everything was new for me. For me, it was a huge campus at that time and all services were in different buildings, so it made it difficult to navigate in the beginning.

Challenges in the Beginning

There were many challenges in the beginning, both academic and social adjustment. I went through loneliness, no homemade food cook by my mother and the lack of ethnic food choices made me miss homecooked meals, peer pressure to achieve good grades and do well overall, culture shock, financial stress, and basically from having a large family and friends to zero friends and no support system. Even though I completed high school in English language, which was accredited from the University of Cambridge, I struggled in many ways. My understanding of various concepts in Science, Mathematics, and English were clear as I already studied those subjects in high school. I was also able to communicate well verbally. However, understanding concepts was not an issue for me, my major issues were putting my thoughts on to paper. Writing in a certain way blended with critical analysis was huge for me and I was certainly struggling.

The classroom environment was very different, it was not like traditional classrooms in Pakistan where students would listen to their teachers and would not interrupt the classroom (Dewey, 1916). I remember my peers participating in the classroom, having group discussions, eating and drinking during the class, listening to music while the instructor was getting ready to teach the class. Additionally, another shock was that the students called professors and staff by name or with a proper salutation. I was born and raised in South Asia where respect is ingrained in us at so many levels. I was taught never to say a teacher's name, and it took me a very long time to come out of that bubble and use proper salutations with the last name.

Since the campus was small and the number of international students was even less, I was the only international student in most of my courses. I felt discriminated against because many times my group members would not ask for my opinion. I usually waited for my turn to participate but that did not happen most of the time because they thought I did not understand the question/assignment. Because there was some language barrier (not too much as I my oral communication was great but only in writing I was struggling as I was not aware of critical thinking analysis) they made assumption and drew conclusions such as that I may not know the answer, or I would not be able to explain the answer. Sometimes I was even excluded from class discussions, group work, and class activities by students and/or faculty members. One faculty member during the first semester asked in front of the class (over 100+) students,

“Where are you from? What language do you speak? Does your parents speak English?”

I was silent for a moment and processed the information like what was the need for this question. It was a big question for me and made me feel embarrassed because most students started giggling and I felt bad and my confidence was shattered at that moment. I responded and said that my parents do understand and can communicate in English a little bit, but they are not fluent. Since that day, he never talked with me in the class. I was devastated and slowly my self-esteem was going down, and my ability to participate during the classes went down a lot. As Wu et al (2015) described in their study about participants that they felt discriminated in social and academic settings because people in the host institution may not understand their backgrounds and made conclusions (p.6). That was exactly what I experienced right in the first semester when I was already going through acculturative stress.

Experience of four years

The first year was the year of transition as I was navigating through various challenges and was trying to adjust into a new culture. During the first year, I struggled with academic and social challenges. However, during the second year, the challenges shifted more towards completing the degree requirements on time on top of academic challenges. Social challenges subsided at this point because I was more focused on my degree, wanted to gain experiences and worked to expand my skillset. However, the undergraduate advisor that I got did not advise me properly in terms of graduating on time, career explorations, courses selections etc. And a naïve 18-year-old who did not have much knowledge in terms of career, courses selection, benefits of co-op and internships. Some wrong selection of courses put my graduation in jeopardy and instead of graduating in 4 years, I was going to graduate after 5 years and that put me in a very

challenging situation. Since I was paying international tuition and other expenses were already too high. International students need to have health insurance plus rent, food expenses, and other expenses that were hard to manage from month to month. International tuition fees and health insurance were very expensive. It was very hard to manage all the expenses by myself. This news that I won't be able to graduate on time was devastating. After going through so many hurdles, I changed my majors and went for a very different program than I intended. However, with this change, I was on track of graduating on time.

During the third and fourth year, I had to take the maximum number of courses in order to graduate on time. So, I took six to seven courses (19 credit hours) and that was a lot of work for me. I stopped going to social events, did not interact with those friends that I just made in the last two years, and had so much pressure to graduate with an honors degree. I was sleep deprived and was mentally, physically, socially, and psychologically drained. Due to a lack of social support, course load of extra courses, part-time work on-campus, a pressure to maintain higher GPA, and no family and friends made it extremely difficult to survive. However, finally, I graduated, and then other challenges started.

Being an international student, another challenge was to find an internship/co-op in my field. I could not find any unpaid internship/co-op during my time at the university. I was not able to secure a job in my field after graduation. I received a lot of feedback from employers after being rejected, continuously. Some employers mentioned that because I did not have any experience as a professional, they would not be able to hire me. Some employers did say that if you had permanent residency, we would have considered you. Some employers did not even know that work permits exist for international students. I understand that it was a small town with not too much diversity but was rejected way too many times. My family spent over 85K USD in the span of four years. I worked part-time on-campus and saved every single penny for my food, accommodation, and other expenses. That time was devastating, all my peers from my cohort landed amazing opportunities whereas I was struggling to even find an entry-level role. I had to re-think my future and the only option at that time was for me to return to my home country.

A transformative Learning Experience

While there were so many challenges that I had to face during my undergraduate journey as an international student, I also had some amazing learning experiences as well. These four years really change my life forever, and I look at life and the world? with a different perspective. Even though some professors made discriminatory comments and judged me in various ways because I have an accent and was not able to communicate very well in writing, there were other professors who encouraged and supported me in many different circumstances. There were some professors who asked me if I understood the concepts well and if I needed any help. One professor specifically asked, "You are smart. If you ever need help in anything, don't hesitate to ask questions." (Dr. P)

I worked on-campus at the Writing Center, International Department, Campus Dining, Arts Center, and Career Center over the four years. Each experience was filled with deep learning, growth, and wonderful mentors that truly shaped my identity. I worked in the writing and international department simultaneously. I realized that there were missing bridges for international students mainly from my own experiences as a student and employee which were preventing them from succeeding. I initiated the collaboration between international department and the writing center to start coffee hour and the speaking conversation hour where international students would get together for an hour and we would invite guest speakers, student services support, community members, and domestic students. This was proposed so that they would get to know about support services that are available on-campus, history about the area, interaction with locals, and build friendship and connections with domestic students. The coffee hour was successful and there was a lot of growth over the next couple of years.

I was also fortunate enough to have a truly amazing mentor who not only encouraged me always to pursue my dreams, but she also always stood by my side. She knew that my writing skills were not excellent, but she provided me with all the tools and resources that helped me to achieve the required skills that I needed at that time and till this day, I use those resources here and there. She motivated me to look for different opportunities that would equip me

with skills that are needed in a professional career. Under her supervision, I completed various certifications. Because of the experience at the writing center, I learned to create a safe space for my students whether it was one-on-one or group sessions. Additionally, I learned about student-centered teaching, semiotics, multimodality, and above all, I developed empathy for students. During my undergraduate, I have had amazing experiences working at various departments on-campus which truly stirred so much passion in me to serve in higher education. I was not only motivated to provide support to students in higher education, I also wanted to be an advocate for them.

Hence, even though I graduated with an honors degree in STEM, I wholeheartedly was very instilled into student affairs because of thrilling experiences on-campus as a student. Finally, after struggling for five years after graduation, I decided to go back to school for a graduate degree focusing on student affairs. As soon as I started the program, I was able to find a full-time contract role in higher education and after about a few months, I landed a permanent job in a different department at the same institution. Finally, I am satisfied with my career, current job, and goals that I have accomplished so far, and some goals are currently being pursued. I am thrilled that I am working with students every day and get to support them in their academic journey and campus life. Getting into higher education was a dream for me and I am finally able to live this dream.

Conclusion

International students face various challenges whether its pre-departure, during their educational path, or after graduation but resilience, patience, and hard work pays off at the end. However, now after more than a decade of hard work and consistency, I strongly recommend that social and emotional support is important for psychological, physical, and emotional well-being. It is important to reach out to campus services and ask for help. I did not ask for help because I was not aware if those services were available for international students. Additionally, it is even more important to have mentors. Good mentors can change your life forever. After being an international student, student affairs professional, and a faculty member, I am paying it forward. I have been mentoring for the last four years and it is one of the best roles that I am a part of. I would recommend to current and potential international students that never give up on your dreams and desires for your professional careers. Your hard work, efforts, and struggles will bear fruit in the end. As I always say, “there is a light at the end of the tunnel, just keep walking, it doesn’t matter whether you walk slow or fast, you will eventually get there.”

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