

International Graduate Nursing Students at Azusa Pacific University: Identification of  
Transitional Challenges  
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### Abstract

The increased demands for Advanced Practice Nurses (APNs) have grown tremendously all over the world. This demand expanded the number of international graduate nursing students pursuing their Advanced Practice Nursing (APN) degrees abroad. This study investigated graduate international nursing student's transitional challenges and needs while pursuing their APN degree at Azusa Pacific University (APU). Excitement, fear, new culture, new language, and new environment, these are some of the factors that affects the transitional process of many international students. Moving to a new environment is not easy especially for graduate students adapting to a new academic challenges. The purpose of this study is to identify the transitional challenges of international graduate nursing students at APU. Identification of these challenges will help the Master's of Science in Nursing (MSN) program determine the better support services needed for the growing population of international nursing students at Azusa Pacific University (APU) School of Nursing.

*Keywords:* international students, advanced practice nurses, transitional challenges

### International Graduate Nursing Students at APU: Identification of Transitional Challenges

Advanced Practice Nursing (APN) programs such as Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) and Nurse Practitioner (NP) programs have become more popular in the medical field not only in the United States, but also in other countries. The needs for advanced practice nurses have grown tremendously all over the world. The development of APN has become a global trend in the last few decades (Sheer, 2008). The graduate nursing programs at Azusa Pacific University (APU) supports the global needs for APNs by opening the program for both domestic and international students all over the world. According to APU School of Nursing (SON) website, “APU provides innovative nursing programs, leading the way in solving the world’s nursing shortage.”

The need for APNs reflects the current data from APU Masters of Science in Nursing (MSN) Program. Currently, the MSN program has three hundred fifty students enrolled at three campuses: Azusa, Inland Empire, and San Diego; nineteen of those are international students from different countries all over the world (B. Barthelmess, personal communication, September 24, 2012). This number shows the increase of international graduate nursing students over the last few years. These students moved to the United States with different backgrounds, different cultures, and different perspectives in education and life.

International graduate students came here with excitement, hope, fear, and anxiety. The first year of the graduate school is one of the most difficult stages for international student because of the challenge of learning new culture and environment. While studying abroad, international students have often faced a series of transitional difficulties such as communication, culture, stress, and many others, which impact their well being in learning (Zhou, 2011). In general, studies revealed that the biggest challenge international students confronted in a foreign setting was adapting to a new environment (Dodge, 1990; Du Bois, 1956; Gezi, 1965; Kohl,

1979 as cited in Zhou, 2011).

APU provides many resources for international students, from the application process, to student orientation, class registration, housing, immigration process, and student's entire stay at APU. However, international graduate nursing students still face several challenges in many aspects that need additional attention and support from the MSN department.

### **Review of Literature**

As of the year 2011, there are total of 296,574 international graduate students enrolled in the United States (Open Doors, 2011). According to the statement of Ann Stock, Assistant Secretary of State of Educational and Cultural Affairs, this notable increase was made possible through the partnership of the State Department with U.S. colleges and universities to reach out for talented international students, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Romerhausen, 2011, p. 18).

The growing number of international students enrolled in U. S. colleges and universities has called attention to provide special services to help international students adjust to the host culture and solve the unique problems they face (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1986 as cited in Zhai, 2004). Students coming to the U.S. start encounter difficulties as early as obtaining permission to study in the U.S., including interviews and immigration regulations (Lee & Rice, 2007). Social isolation, instructional difficulties, and discrimination are not the only hurdles that international students may encounter but also the potential effects of these issues (Romerhausen, 2011, p. 19). Several literatures have recognized that education in the U. S. can be a difficult transition because of culture shock or adjustment difficulties (Olaniran, 1996; Zhao, Kuh, & Carini, 2005), fear of failure (Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002), and isolation (Zhao, Kuh, & Carini,

2005) (as cited in (Romerhausen, 2011, p. 19). These challenges may lead to a negative experience of the international students and may cause student failures.

Different food (Constantino Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005), unfamiliar living circumstances (Hayes & Lin, 1994), education system (Mori, 2000), and language barriers (Yoon & Portman, 2004) are also some of the difficulties faced by many international students transitioning to the U. S. higher education (as cited in Zhuo, 2011). Many international students also experienced some psychosocial issues during transition, including stress, depression, homesickness, and loneliness (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). These issues if not given a proper attention will hinder international students success in the U. S. higher education.

Communication is one of the most obvious problems for many international students, (Jimenez and Leichnitz, n.d.). Although most schools like Azusa Pacific University requires good passing rate in English as measure by Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), still this entrance grade requirement is not always a 100% indicator of student's communication skills in the classroom. Andrade argued that listening and speaking tasks present unique difficulties for non-native speakers because of the rapidity of speech, colloquialisms, and native accents (as cited Tokuno, 2008, p. 73). A lower mastery level of English may lead to frustration when communicating with English speaking individuals (Pranata, Foo-Kune, Rodolfa, n.d). Realistically, English proficiency is one of the factors to be successful in the graduate program here in the U. S. especially for advanced practice nursing programs where students are required to face and assess their patients' everyday.

Culture, on the other hand, plays a big role in the adjustment of international students. One of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of American-style education that represents a significant difference to many international students is the interactive nature of the classroom

(Tokuno, 2008, p. 74). According to Homes (2004), “Interruption, comments, asking questions, and volunteering answers can be considered “bold and immodest” to many international students” (as cited in Tokuno, 2008, p. 74). Culture shock also affects the ability of the student to establish a social support system because of their fear and anxiety.

Different aspects of international students and their transition to the U. S. education have been reviewed over the years. In summary, significant number of literatures pointed out that international students encounter many problems in adjusting to the U. S. higher education. In order for colleges and universities to understand problems international students face after they come to the United States, more research are needed to be done to determine the issues and identify needed support services (Zhai, 2004).

### **Purpose**

APU aims to help, to provide opportunities, to encourage, and to make all international students feel at home (APU International Center Handbook, 2012, p. 7). School of Nursing MSN program, on the other hand, understands that there are several challenges and specific needs that international nursing students face when they move to the U. S. higher education nursing program. Align with the mission of the School of Nursing, “to serve God through excellence in professional nursing education, scholarship, and practice,” (SON Handbook, 2012), the main purpose of this study is to help all international graduate nursing students to be successful in the advanced practice role fields. The first step is to identify their transitional challenges and unique needs in the advanced nursing program. This paper will reach out to the current international MSN students in the program, to learn more from them, and to determine their program specific needs. Furthermore, result of this study will provide better understanding of challenges and needs of international nursing students that will help the program, faculty, and

staff to create and determine effective support services for the growing population of international graduate nursing students at APU.

### **Methodology**

This study utilized combined qualitative and quantitative methods to examine and identify the experiences and transitional challenges of the international graduate nursing students. This study conducted group interviews with international students at the School of Nursing and also utilized online questionnaires through email for students with different work and class schedules. Although there are limitations with online questionnaires, the results from this survey benefited this study with more feedbacks from the participants.

### **Needs Assessment**

This study focused on strategic needs assessment (Gupta, 2007). This assessment “examined and identified the existing performance” (p. 27) of the whole MSN program towards international graduate nursing students. This also “identified the performance improvement opportunities at various levels” (p. 27) of the program staff, resources, and the organization as a whole when it comes to the services being provided for international students.

### **Participants**

Participants included international graduate nursing students currently enrolled in the Master’s of Science in Nursing (MSN) at Azusa Pacific University. Eleven international graduate students agreed to participate in the interview process and online questionnaire. This group consists of three males and eight females originated from different countries in the world. Participants according to their ethnicity report from the MSN program came from the following birth countries: Korea, China, Philippines, Taiwan, Vietnam, United Kingdom and, Saudi Arabia.

Eleven participants are all advanced practice nursing (APN) students. The students are currently enrolled in different MSN program specialties: 6 Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) students, 3 Adult Nurse Practitioners (ANP), and 2 Clinical Nurse Specialist (CNS) students. The participants range from first year to graduating MSN students.

### **Sampling Plan**

This study conducted separate interviews for two different groups of students to meet the participant's class and work schedules. Other participants who did not make it to the group interview agreed to share their experiences through email.

The following guidelines were used during the interviews (Creswell, 1998, 2009; Eisner, 1998; Shank, 2002, & Silverman, 1993 as cited in Leedy & Omrod, 2010, p. 149): (1) Identified questions in advance; (2) considered participant's cultural background; (3) used suitable location; (4) issued written permission; and (5) focused on actual facts.

This study also looked at the current literature and studies that pertains to the transitional challenges of international students in different fields.

### **Procedure and Instrument**

This study developed four open-ended questions to guide the group interviews and online questionnaire. Interviews were held at one of the conference rooms at the School of Nursing at APU. The group interviews benefited this study because of the human interaction; interviewer was able to observe facial expressions and other non-verbal cues from the participants (Gupta, 2007, p. 45).

Because some of the participants on this study are currently enrolled in the clinical rotation classes, scheduling group interview was a little challenging. In order to reach reasonable



number of participants, this study approached several students and proposed online interview through email and obtained very good responses from them.

Before beginning the group and email interviews, the researcher informed the participants that their identities would remain confidential and secured. This study interviewed seven international students and the rest participated through email. The interview was audio-recorded to get the clear answers from the group and it lasted for sixty minutes. Some parts of the interview were semi-structured and conversational where the interviewer and participants discussed context of the student's transitional challenges to the US higher education. In semi-structured interview, a list of objectives with corresponding questions were provided and this also gave an opportunity to the interviewer to ask supplemental questions to explore further areas of interest (Gupta, 2007, p. 46). Other parts of the interview used phenomenological approach. This is the part where the researcher listens closely as participants describe their experiences related to the phenomenon (Gupta, 2007, p. 141).

On the other hand, students who participated on the email got a reasonable amount of time to complete the questionnaires. This study prepared the same open-ended questions similar to the questions given to the group interviews. Clear instructions, cover letter, and deadline explanation were given to the participants to meet the objectives and desired results (Gupta, 2007, p. 51).

After the interview and survey, all participants received thank you letters for sharing their times, experiences, and challenges.

### **Analysis**

To understand and learn the transitional challenges of the international graduate nursing students at APU, this study used phenomenological approach. This kind of approach helped

understand some of the challenges of many international students. In other words, phenomenological study tries to answer the question, what is it like to experience such and such? (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 141).

The researcher has personal experience comparable to international students. She moved in the U.S. as an immigrant back in 2007. The transitional challenges were difficult at first especially when it comes to culture, language barrier, and food and weather differences. In other words, the researcher experienced the phenomenon and by looking at multiple perspectives in almost the same situation, the researcher made some generalizations of what something is like from an insider's perspective (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 141).

After the interviews and the compilation of the online questionnaires, this study identified the common themes in participant's descriptions of their experiences using the following steps (Creswell, 1998 as cited in Leedy & Ormrod, 2010, p. 142): (1) identified statements that relate to the topic; (2) grouped statements into "meaning units"; (3) sought divergent perspective; and (4) constructed a composite. The final result the interview focused on the common themes despite the diversity of the participants.

## **Results**

1. Tell me about the positive experiences you have had as international student.

Table 1 summarized the student's positive experiences. While challenges and some difficulties are expected, the participants noted positive experiences of being international graduate nursing students. Five participants (46%) stated that learning new culture was a great experience for them. Learning the differences, the culture from other countries, the race, and ethnicity helped them understand the vital role of culture awareness in the nursing profession. Diversity came next as one of the positive experiences for international graduate nursing

students. One participant said about diversity: “One positive experience for me is the diversity in Los Angeles where 50% of the student community is of different races and ethnicity. I love the opportunities to interact with students and professors who understand and respect diversity, those who sees the importance and beauty of a diverse student community.”

Availability of good academic resources (27%) at APU contributes as one of the positive experiences for several international nursing graduate students. The participants stated that good resources started with the admission process, the helpful staff and faculty, the availability of the library, writing center, international center, and nursing department. All of these contributed to provide very good learning resources for international students. Learning new language and quality education were also part of the positive experiences of the students.

Table 1

*International Graduate Nursing Students Positive Experiences (n=11)*

Positive Experiences	<i>f</i>	Percent
Learning new culture	5	46
Diversity	4	36
Good academic resources	3	27
Learning new language	2	18
Quality education	2	18

*Note:* Percentages presented in the table are percent of all students in this pilot study (n=11).

2. What are your most frequently used resources in the university to help you adjust to the educational environment in the U.S?

International graduate nursing students reported that library (64%), writing center (45%), friends and colleagues (45%), international center (27%), nursing office (18%), and health center (18%) were the most used resources for them. The students appreciate the accessibility of books, articles, computers, electronic resources, and study room that were all made available for them.

English is a second language for many graduate international nursing students. Several students mentioned how graduate school challenged their writing skills. Writing Center became a household name for many international students because of the assistance they provided for the students such as grammar checking, APA, flow of ideas, and many more. One student stated that her writing is much better now compared before when she was just starting.

Friends and colleagues were also reported as one of the resources for many international students. Friends, classmates, faculty, and staff were considered the extended family for many international students. One student mentioned that for many times, she had a hard time understanding the lecture of her professor and making friends with her classmate helped her a lot personally and professionally.

International Center, nursing office, and health center were accessible and helpful also for many graduate international nursing students adjusting to the U. S. academic environment.

Table 2

*International Graduate Nursing Students Frequently Used Resources (n=11)*

Resources	<i>f</i>	Percentage
Library	7	64

Writing Center	5	45
Friends & Colleagues	5	45
International Center	3	27
School of Nursing	2	18
Health Center	2	18

*Note:* Percentages presented in the table are percent of all students in this pilot study (n=11).

3. What are the most important transitional challenges you encountered after you came to the United States? Please list the top three.

All students experienced significant challenges and difficulties when they first moved here in the U. S. including language issues, social integration, financial support, transportation, food, homesickness, and culture shock. Language challenges (73%), social integration (64%), and financial support (46%) were considered the top three most transitional challenges for international graduate nursing students.

Eight students (73%) reported English proficiency as one of their biggest challenges. Although they know English when they moved here in the U. S., this still became a problem especially on the first year of their graduate school. One student mentioned that it was difficult for her to understand the classroom lecture because of the rapidity of speech and accent. Another participant also stated, “There are times that I want to ask questions but I am too scared to start a conversation, it was difficult for me to express my thoughts and ideas.”

Because of communication issue also, many international students found it very challenging to socialize and make friends easily with American students. One participant

mentioned that due to language barrier, her connection with her American classmates was really slow and at times, a challenging process. There are times they felt socially isolated because they are still adjusting to the new culture and lifestyle.

Financial support also came out as one the challenges for many international students. Majority of the students stated that their family supports their education here, and one of the issues they found was the conversion of money from their home country to the U. S. currency. One student from the Philippines stated an example that one thousand dollars here is already fifty thousand pesos in her country. The MSN program supports international graduate nursing student who wants to work in the U.S. using Curricular Practical Training (CPT). This authorizes them to work for twenty hours per week only, but serves a good source of additional income for many international nursing students.

Table 3

*International Graduate Nursing Students Transitional Challenges (n=11)*

Adjustment problems	<i>f</i>	Percentage
Language challenges	8	73
Social integration	7	64
Financial support	5	46
Transportation	4	36
Food	3	27
Homesickness	3	27

Culture shock	2	18
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*Note:* Percentages presented in the table are percent of all students in this pilot study (n=11).

4. What do you think your department should do to help international students make better adjustments?

Students suggested that it would be really helpful if the Master's of Science in Nursing (MSN) program could provide a writing support specific for Advanced Practice Nursing (APN) research (see Table 4). Though the APU Writing Center helps them a lot, the center does not provide support specific for APN research. Orientation addressing US health care system was also recommended for them to better understand the health care system in the U. S. Additionally; students also suggested that MSN department should provide resources for job placement and support for international nursing students.

Table 4

*Recommendations by International Graduate Nursing Students (n=11)*

Recommendations	<i>f</i>	Percentage
Writing support for Advanced Practice Nursing	7	64
US health care system orientation for international students	4	36
Job Support	3	27
Interaction with fellow international students	2	18
Counseling	1	9

*Note:* Percentages presented in the table are percent of all students in this pilot study (n=11).

## **Discussion**

There are numerous findings that support the unique experiences of international graduate nursing students. They range from the positive side to the most challenging aspect of being an international student.

**International Graduate Nursing Students Positive Experiences.** Result of this study show that learning and adapting to a new culture, diversity, and good academic resources are the positive experiences for many international graduate nursing students. As other study shows, the process of adjusting to a new culture is somewhat predictable where majority of international students experience excessive anxiety during their first year (Ogberg, 1960 as cited in Herlina, n. d.). To somewhat contradict this result, this study shows that majority of the international graduate nursing students at APU enjoyed the learning process of adapting to a new culture. They love the diversity, the uniqueness of the US academic environment, the culture of the other people, and their background. This is probably because of their profession as a nurse who sees diversity as an advantage. Their profession sees no boundaries, regardless of the culture, country, and language; health is the main language for these nursing students.

**Most Frequently Used Resources in APU.** Results of this study shows that library and writing center were the top two used resources in the campus. This result connects to the adjustment and transition problems of many international students. Because of the language and financial support issues, many international students appreciate the accessibility of books, free articles, computers, and study rooms in APU. The writing center was also a big help because of the support they provided for international students learning and continuing to learn English.

**Transitional Challenges.** Results of this study show that language challenges, social integration, and financial support were the top three most significant transitional challenges for



many international nursing graduate students. As several students mentioned, speaking, understanding, and writing in pure English became their biggest concern especially on the first year of their graduate school. As graduate nursing requires heavy writing in advanced practice nursing research, language proficiency became one of their academic stresses as international student. This result is consistent with many studies done for international students. Problems with English language proficiency can significantly affect international students ability to succeed in academics (Zhai, 2002).

International graduate nursing students also mentioned social integration as one of their transitional challenges. Because of the difficulty of speaking and understanding English, several international students felt isolated and were afraid to establish friendship with American students. Social integration was also viewed as one of the major adjustment issues in several studies concerning international students (Chen, 1996; Cho, 1988; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1991 as cited in Zhai, 2004). Financial support, on the other hand, was also mentioned as one of the problems for many international students. Given the fact of how expensive nursing school is, the conversion of money from student's home country to the U. S. currency was one of the factors of this problem. Visa restriction also hinders student's capacity to work and support themselves.

**Department Support.** As APU provides many resources for international students, majority of the participants recommended that MSN department provide academic writing support specifically for advanced practice nursing (APN). Orientation program addressing US health care system and job support were also suggested.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

The main purpose of this study is to identify the transitional challenges of the international graduate nursing student. While acknowledging APU's support and resources for international students community, there are some academic and personal support needed specifically for international graduate nursing students. Based on the result of this study, it is recommended that MSN department should consider the following to help the needs of the growing population of international graduate advanced practice nursing students:

1. Provide free academic writing and language support center for advanced practice nursing students

This study concludes that because of language proficiency issue, many APN international students found difficulty in writing specifically nursing related research topics. The MSN department may work together with the APU writing center and provide a specific writing support program for nursing students. They can probably ask several MSN faculty to be available 2-3 times a week to help international graduate nursing students. Hiring a senior MSN students to be available for them might also work. Offering a free writing and language workshop for international students one or two times a semester is another option to explore.

2. U. S. health care system orientation program

One of the biggest issues for many international nursing graduate students is the understanding of US health care system. Majority of the students worked in their home countries but have a very limited knowledge about the US health care system. Learning the new health care system was additional stress for many students. Creating program-orienting students to the new health care system will definitely play a major role on their success. The MSN program has professional practitioners who are working as Clinical Nurse Specialist and Nurse

Practitioner. It would certainly help if the MSN program can organize a program aiming to help the students to be familiar with new health care system, medical insurance, new medical terms, and even new medical technology.

### 3. Establish job support for international nursing students

The MSN department just recently approved the Curricular Practical Training (CPT) for all international nursing graduate students. The CPT aims to help graduate international students to gain nursing experiences in the U. S. This also helps the student to get a paid-job to support some of their financial needs. In addition to this support, the MSN department may also help the students through professional networking. Faculty advisors may help by introducing potential job clinical sites for these students.

### 4. Establish social connection and interaction program with fellow American students

Social integration was one of the biggest challenges for international students. During the transition period, students were scared to establish friendship because of the communication issue. Therefore, creating program or event that will bridge international and American students is highly recommended. Increase interactions with fellow American students will not only introduce them to the American culture but it will also improve their communication skills. This program could also support international students establish social support while away from their families.

## **Conclusions and Future Study**

In order to gain complete understanding of the challenges and needs of the MSN international students, it is necessary to conduct further study that will deeply examine the experiences and challenges of the international students community. This is a pilot study; time constraints and low number of participants were some of the limitations of this research.

However, the MSN Council showed interest of learning the result of this study to determine the needs of the MSN international students community.

Although there are some challenges, all participants still expressed their happiness and satisfaction about their education and experiences in the U.S. and at APU.

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## **Appendix A**

### **A.1 Interview Protocol**

To facilitate our interview, I would like to audio tape our conversation today. For your information, only the principal investigator on this study will have an access to the tape and will be destroyed after being transcribed. In addition, this document explains that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) the researcher does not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your participation (National Center for Postsecondary Improvement, 2012).

### **A.2 Email/Online Questionnaire Protocol**

The purpose of this research project is to identify the transitional challenges of the graduate international nursing students. This is a research being conducted by Annaliza Santos at Azusa Pacific University, Masters of Arts in Leadership program. Your participation in this research study is voluntary and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable. The questionnaire involves four open-ended questions and will take approximately 30 to 40 minutes to complete. Your identification will remain confidential and secured. The result of this study will be used for scholarly purposes only. Thank you for your participation. (SurveyMonkey, 2012).

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview Script**

Thank you for agreeing to see me. The purpose of this interview is to discuss the transitional challenges of the international graduate nursing students and to get your views for the strategic needs assessment for the MSN program. Your name will remain confidential and secured. I prepared four open-ended questions to get us started and there may be other follow-up questions as we talk. Here are the questions (Gupta, 2010, p. 47):



### Appendix C

#### Questionnaire:

The following four open-ended questions are develop to guide the interview process:

1. Tell me about the positive experiences you have had as international student.
2. What are your most frequently used resources in the university to help you adjust to the educational environment in the U.S.?
3. What are the most important adjustment problems you encountered after you came to the United States? Please list the top three.
4. What do you think your department should do to help international students make better adjustments?