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# **New Voices from Intersecting Identities among International Students Around the World: Transcending Single Stories of Coming and Leaving**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this article, we introduce our special issue: *International students' lived experiences in the era unprecedented by uncertainty and challenges: New voices from intersectional identities*. Our motivation and intention, focus, and overall methodological approach for this special issue are discussed. In addition to presenting the contributions of each article to this issue, we also discuss how our (all authors of this special issue) voices reflect our unique experiences of coming to new countries as international students by unfolding our stories and multiple intersecting identities that we experienced.

Keywords: International students, autoethnography, intersection of identities

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## **INTRODUCTION**

As higher education becomes more globalized, extensive numbers of students cross borders to study around the world. International students contribute to their host countries in many ways from growing their economy and leading innovation (NAFSA, 2019) to enriching the inter-cultural experiences available within host

communities. Additionally, international students bring a wide range of skills and knowledge, which enhances the intellectual capital of global universities and workforces (Zhang, 2016). The resources international students bring with them individually, promotes the internationalization of higher education and enrich as well as diversify campus climates (Ward et al., 2015).

However, international students encounter many challenges and difficulties while pursuing their degrees in foreign countries and institutions. Studying and living in a foreign country can lead to experiences of stress, acculturation difficulties, and adjustment problems. It also presents issues such as language barriers, financial distress loneliness, adjustments to a new educational system, different social customs and norms, and discrimination (Gold, 2016; Ma, 2020; Mukminin, 2019; Tang et al., 2018; Xing & Bolden, 2019). These challenges significantly impact students' overall well-being and shape their experiences as international students (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016; Koo, Kim et al., 2021). According to Zhang and Goodson (2011), approximately 20% of international students are at risk of psychological distress due to difficulties with adjustment and acculturation. Thus, it is imperative that researchers and administrators pay attention to international students' challenges and unique experiences.

Lastly, while many international students experience positive academic and cultural adjustments to their host countries, numerous receive mixed or negative messages while experiencing microaggressions and hate-filled interactions. These interactions cause significant confusion, anger, and trauma. Additionally, recent travel bans, increasing nationalism, nativism, linguism, and racism, and frequent changes in immigration laws, mostly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic or growing nationalistic and anti-global ideologies, have forced international students to confront complex, multi-layered emotions in their academic work and their personal, social, and professional lives. In short, international students are increasingly experiencing a wide range of situations and incidents that is leaving them with deep scars and strong emotions tied directly to these events.

These emotions have a profound effect on international students' personal and academic lives, but very often their "voice" is not noticed or heard in studies on higher education students' experiences. Thus, in this special issue of the *Journal of International Students*, we provide a space to bring forth the experiences and emotions of international students through narratives in their voice. This kind of writing allows international students to describe their lived experiences in their own words and, hopefully, to be heard. In this special issue, the reader will find personal narratives that depart from dominant research traditions and knowledge and bring forth a diversity of contexts (locations), experiences, and positionalities to subjects to which they are normally not heard.

These narratives also illuminate the complex and multiple identities of international students. Indeed, these students and scholars come from diverse cultures and countries, but they also represent various identities from the standpoint of gender, sexual orientations, socioeconomic statuses, and religious or spiritual beliefs, to name just a few. The multiple identities of international students, not simply their international education, shape their overall experience (Yang et al., 2018). Since a limited number of resources explore international

students' unique experiences while recognizing their multiple dimensions of identities – considering not just their international identity or country of origin but also other dimensions and intersections of those - studies exploring international students' multiple identities related to their unique experiences as students are greatly needed. International students' intersecting identities are dynamic and shift within the differing environments of their home and host countries. In this special issue, we specifically examine the intersectionality of international students' identities as they deal with experiences of discrimination and marginalization.

To provide real and vivid stories from international students' lived experiences, the articles in this special issue employ autoethnography as a research method. As both participants and storytellers, the international student researchers in this special issue share their personal narratives by unfolding their genuine and vivid stories of living and studying in foreign countries. Embracing their personal stories, the authors weave their thoughts, feelings, and emotions of their lived experiences with their surrounding environments. These authors range from current international students to former international graduate students; many of whom have continued into academia as postdocs or tenure-track professors. The authors come from all around the world and show while their individual experiences are unique, some common threads run throughout their narratives. In this introductory article, we share a summary of these common threads emanating from these students' stories of coming and going as an international student. We conclude by providing an overview of each article in this special issue and highlight how each unique article addresses a distinctive aspect and voice of being an international student.

### **THE STORIES OF COMING**

International students are individuals who undertake their post-secondary education in a country other than their home country for the purpose of studying or pursuing an academic degree (Koo, Baker et al., 2021). There is a long history of higher education around the world, and the numbers of internationally mobile students are increasing and destinations are diversifying (Koo & Nyunt, 2020). In 2020, there were more than six million international students globally, and this is dramatically up from two million in 2000 (UNESCO, 2021). The United States (over a million international students), Australia (approximately 510,160 international students), and the United Kingdom (approximately 500,019 international students) were the most popular destinations, hosting approximately 35% of the entire international student population around the world (UNESCO, 2021).

International students invest their time, effort, and finances to prepare for study abroad and admission in their host countries. They climb different mountains to gain admission abroad such as taking standardized English exams, taking graduate entrance exams (e.g., GRE), writing statements of purpose, preparing documents to prove financial stability, applying for visas, and so on to embark on their new educational chapter in a foreign country (Koo, Nyunt et al.,

2021). The stories of coming or arriving of international students may start with those pre-entrance preparation processes in their home countries, since those processes take a lot of effort and time - from one year to several years prior to departure depending on the personal circumstances of the student. While the admission preparation process is challenging and time-consuming, many international students believe that all challenges will be resolved once they arrive in a host country and start studying abroad (Koo, Kim et al., 2021).

However, the stories of coming are not always beautiful or positive. The first year for international students is quite challenging for several reasons, such as adjustment difficulties due to cultural differences, social norms, social isolations, language barriers, lack of academic support, lack of interactions with domestic colleagues and faculty, and daily hassles (e.g., opening a bank account, applying for a driver's license, setting up utility bills) (Koo, Baker et al., 2021; Gold, 2016; Mukminin, 2019; Tang et al., 2018; Telbis et al., 2014; Xing & Bolden, 2019). These challenges are different from what domestic students encounter during their first year, while research tends to generalize across all first-year experiences. The first year for international students and their experiences of coming are the stories of unique pressures and difficult adjustments on top of what every first-year student may experience. The aforementioned challenges can cause acculturative stress and impact their mental well-being (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). Zhang and Goodson (2011) reported that that 15%–20% of international students are at risk of experiencing mental distress due to acculturative stress and adjustment difficulties. It is important to note these numbers of international students at risk of experiencing stress or adjustment issues were before the COVID pandemic, which has only exacerbated the situation even more (Koo, 2021b).

In many cases, international students are those who were academically high achievers in their home countries and highly proficient in English, and many of them are selected as government-funded scholars from their home countries (Koo, Km et al., 2021). However, those with the excelled English skills and academic competence are not considered as good in their host country as they were in their home countries and many international students immediately get frustrated that they cannot understand the lectures, class activities, and class discussions in their host universities (Koo, Yao et al., 2021; Koo, Kim et al., 2021). This bitter and frustrating experiences impacts international students' first impressions in their host countries as first-year international students. In addition, while many international students expect that they will make a lot of good friends with domestic peers in their host institutions, most international students end up reporting their close friends are fellow international students who are coming from their home countries (Zhu & Bresnahan, 2018). Many international students have to come to terms with the reality that making a new domestic friend during their studying abroad is not always occurring, and since this primarily is due to social isolation, it makes these challenges from international students' stories of coming even more difficult for host institutions and communities wrestle with and address.

The class activities and learning process in host countries are often different and unfamiliar to many international students (Tang et al., 2018; Zhou & Zhang, 2014). While international students are used to a passive learning model and hierarchical interactions with instructors in their home countries, higher education in Western countries, which hosts the majority of international students, pursues a learning partnership model, group discussions, and self-directed learning which are challenging and unfamiliar to many international students (Koo & Tan, 2022). Due to this, international students often experience frustrations in their classrooms and tend to not actively participate in class activities as they often feel very behind in their classes at their host institutions. While the aforementioned challenges of English acquisition, differences in academic settings, and social isolations that international students encounter are common stories of coming, international students may have diverse experiences of coming due to their different identities, backgrounds, personal stories that they bring and the environments and climates of their host institutions. Regardless of the differences in stories of coming, all of their stories are meaningful and part of their learning process as international students.

## **REFLECTIONS ON LEAVING**

Participating in international higher education can be likened to taking one's place within a larger global enterprise: sitting in courses with fellow students who most likely come from a different background. Lectures, papers, learning, and place are all bound together into the rhythm of a "globalized" classroom, which is framed as something to be desired. Students seek out these opportunities from gaining a competitive edge in the labor market (King & Raghuram, 2013) to experiencing an overseas adventure in a manner that is acceptable to their families and society (King & Sondhi, 2018). On the other side, institutions and governments have long viewed international students as a way to generate revenue and fill shortages in their labor markets (Cantwell, 2015; Mathies & Weimer, 2018; Riaño, Van Mol, Raghuram, 2018); many are increasingly interested in understanding the reasons international students stay or leave the host country after graduation (Mathies & Karhunen, 2021a, 2021b). Higher education operates as a 'quasi-market' with the international student mobility as one of the many submarkets within it (Kauppinen, Mathies, & Weimer, 2014; Teixeira, Jongbloed, Dill, & Amaral 2004). In short, international higher education is a wide-encompassing venture with engaged actors and stakeholders located throughout the world.

Going abroad allows students the space and opportunity to reflect on what it means to be where they are from. People often do not have a clear understanding of their roots, or what makes them "them" till they are uprooted (Olmstead, 2021). As Grace Olmstead (2021, p.19) writes "our economists and politicians, teachers, and celebrities often laud mobility and progression over any sort of planted mentality. We characterize achievement as inherently, etymologically changeful: 'You'll go far,' we tell promising youth. Our cultural touchstones, from Disney

movies to pop songs suggest that separation, independence, and departure are inherent to true triumph.”

The interweaving of the notions of mobility, achievement, and ‘success’ is implanted firmly within international student mobility. But often it is not until a student is abroad, is there reflection on who they are. What do they owe their past? What do they owe the places and people who invested their time, energy, and love in raising them? Should they return ‘home’, for their own reasons or for the sake of the community who raised them? Going abroad for most international students is the first time for them living in another country or without a deep connection to their local communities. It is in these times and spaces where students find themselves reflecting on their ‘leaving’.

The majority of literature on international student experiences focuses on the students’ journey to, during, and after their studies abroad. It is often forward-oriented, i.e., what students gain going abroad or outsiders (e.g. scholars) commenting on students’ experiences as they studied. But these often miss a large aspect of the international student’s journey abroad. They often do not capture the students’ own voice in describing international students’ experiences, and often what is truly missing is the reflection of international students on their leaving. This special issue captures not only these reflections on leaving but also narratives in the students’ own voice. This perhaps is one of the more unique aspects of these authors’ narratives; they share their pain, joy, anguish, and anger of their experiences as an international student, the going. Many though also share their reflections on what it means to them to leave their home, families, and community in pursuing a degree abroad and how those experiences shape them.

### **CONTRIBUTIONS TO THIS SPECIAL ISSUE**

The articles in this special issue are organized into three sections. The first section focuses on international students’ unique experiences during their transitions from being international students to being international scholars. Their career development process and unique challenges of securing positions as international students and professional positions as international scholars in foreign countries form the basis of the narratives in this section. The second section centers on the intersecting multiple identities of international students and their connection to their challenges and difficulties. Whether it is based on their racially minoritized identity, gender, race, or religion, international students struggle with different layers of marginality; this is in addition to being a foreigner in another county. In the third section, international students’ unique struggles during the COVID-19 pandemic are discussed. While all higher education institutions and individuals throughout the world have been and continue to be deeply impacted by this unprecedented global pandemic, international students’ difficulties have been exacerbated due to their minoritized status. The shared narratives are about experiences that domestic students do not need to go through and are shown throughout this third section. We now, directly below, introduce each article briefly and highlight the unique insights each article presents to the readers of this special issue.

The first section on transitions from being an international student to an international scholar begins with Castiello-Gutiérrez's *From Being to Becoming: An International Student's Journey at Becoming an International Education Scholar*. This article highlights the academic journey from being an international student in the United States from Mexico and becoming an international scholar studying international students' mobility. The decision-making process of studying abroad after working as a student affairs professional in his home country is documented as well as his perspectives on different types of discrimination he went through during the transition from student to a scholar in a foreign country.

Zhang-Wu's article entitled *Once a Chinese International Student and Now an English Professor: An Autoethnographic Self-Inquiry of Journeys Against Linguicism and Monolingual Ideologies* illustrates the negative influences of non-Whiteness and non-native-English-speakerness throughout her lived experiences as once a Chinese international student in the United States and her transition to an English professor at a U.S. higher education institution. By unfolding stories of discrimination as an international student who is Asian and a non-native English speaker, she shares her experiences of racism, linguicism, and xenophobia. She concludes her article by showing how these negative experiences continue due to her race, English proficiency, and immigrant status after becoming a tenure-track faculty member. In summary, her article presents how discrimination due to minority status stays the same regardless of their student or faculty status.

Exploring transitions from doctoral student to faculty, Kim and Cho's *Lost in Transition: A Two-Year Collaborative Autoethnography of South Korean Doctoral Students' Development and Identity Negotiation* highlights their significant challenges and difficulties during the career transitions of their transnational and intersectional identities in a liminal space between different geographical locations; the United States and Japan. Based on two years of continued dialogues between the two authors, the article also offers suggestions for negotiating appropriate levels of mediation and reframing intersectional and liminal identities in liberating ways.

In *Studying Abroad as a Journey of Self-Formation: A Collective Autoethnography of International Research Students*, Lin and colleagues apply the concept of self-formation to reconceptualize the international student experience by capturing the development, changes, and operation of identity and self-formation among three Chinese international students studying in Australia. Their stories illustrate their transformation from international students to researchers by demonstrating how self-exploration, self-positioning, and self-determination occurred during their transitions from international students to researchers.

To begin the second section on intersecting multiple identities and their connections to international students' challenges and difficulties, Kang, Kim, and Yun in *(Un)awakened Body/Self in Liminal Status: Collective Autoethnography of Asian International Doctoral Students in the United States* share a story of three Korean female doctoral students' reflections on racism, racial incidents, and their feelings of shame and ignorance on racism while encountering a powerless and



disqualified image of themselves. By sharing lessons learned, the authors also share how their own reflections on racism through artworks helped them to understand the racism they faced and gave them the strength to break the silence. By suggesting different ways of creating space to celebrate voices and experiences, they show how Asian international students encounter intersecting multiple identities and can provide support for other Asian international students.

In *A Stressed Present and a Sacred Future: An Autoethnography of a Migrant Scholar in Finland*, Khan shares her unique experiences and challenges of multiple minoritized identities as a migrant woman with a newborn daughter. This article reveals the epiphanies of the struggle to survive in the academic labor market in Finland while raising a newborn child. For a person who has been undertaking her doctoral research during maternity and self-supporting herself with childcare allowances, the following questions are addressed through the article: “Why should I, or any international social science student, move to Finland to undertake a doctorate?” and “what does my career path as an academic scholar look like in Finland?” By taking academic work as labor, using Marx’s perspective of alienation of labor, the article shows how an international student in Finland with multiple layers of minoritized identities perceives the doctoral degree as labor and the challenges of completing it.

By showing how the same racial background has different perspectives across different countries and cultures, Karaman, in *Coding Whiteness and Racialization: Living in the Space as an Insider-Outsider*, shares her personal stories of her whiteness from the perspectives of “politic of location”. She does this to understand how her whiteness changes and is applied differently across the globe. She highlights how the relevance of white supremacy in some geographies differs due to them having a racially homogenous population. The first part of the article interrogates the author’s personal experiences of whiteness in Turkey, which has a racially homogenous population. The second part of the article shows the author’s experience of whiteness in the United States. Her analysis weaves the two distinct experiences and highlights the different ways in which the same person experiences whiteness; she brings two experiences together at the intersection of her religious identity as a Muslim Turkish woman in racially diverse America. By showing her relations and experiences within the discourse of whiteness and racialization of Muslims, the author reveals how whiteness has significantly different meanings in different locations, and how whiteness’s ideology affects people’s experiences in a different context.

In Andriani’s *How Can I Write Other? The Pains and Possibilities of Autoethnographic’s Doctoral Writing Imagines by a Non-Western Female Student*, an international student from Indonesia shares a story of how writing at the doctoral level is a painful but meaningful process as a doctoral trainee. She shares how a non-native English speaker, who has an Asian racial identity, struggle in Western higher education and Western culture. The author discusses her development during her doctoral writing journey and shows how writing itself can be a dynamic intersection of multiple identities. She demonstrates how authors of autoethnography can show their own unique perspective, culture, race, nativism, and foreignness.

Another illustration of intersecting multiple identities of international students is discussed in Pazil's *I am a Muslim and Asian Woman in the UK: Living Comfortably in an Uncomfortable Situation*. This article is based on a Malaysian postgraduate student's experiences in the United Kingdom. It explores the experiences of the author dealing with Islamophobia and xenophobia while living there as a Muslim and Asian woman. Her lived experiences with Anti-Asian sentiment and xenophobia are shared as a visible and active Muslim and Asian woman in her community. By presenting an intersectional perspective on gender, ethnicity, and religion, the author presents the multi-layered issues and challenges of being an international student. She highlights the challenges of international students expressing their intersectional identities while discussing Islamophobia, as well as inadvertent or deliberate xenophobia towards Asian communities in the United Kingdom.

The third and final section, which focuses on international students' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, begins with Castaneda's *Internationalization, Equity, Affordability, Epistemic Democracy? Or social reproduction and world-class systems?*, she presents several painful stories how the global pandemic and the economic differences among countries shaped an international students' life. By sharing multiple experiences, she provides a layered narrative of an international student from Mexico; from experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic in a foreign country to confronting Western intellectual imperialism. Her article reveals COVID-19's and the illusion of equity of international higher education influence as it exacerbates international students' experiences. She shares how she experienced, dealt with, and matured going through the difficulties of the pandemic and the imbalances among systems.

In *International Student Challenges Further Amplified in the Era of a Pandemic: A tale of a Bangladeshi graduate student*, Zabin shares her experiences of pursuing a doctoral degree within the Canadian higher education system. Her narrative centers on her as an international student from Bangladesh during the COVID-19 pandemic. She shares her academic challenges of taking online courses with minimized interpersonal interactions. She is a learner who invested a great deal of resources as an international student and discusses how her daily life and well-being were negatively impacted by the pandemic in a foreign country, which is exacerbated as a foreigner from a developing country. This article provides a special perspective on how international students experienced the global pandemic which many host countries and non-international students did not necessarily experience nor understand (or don't even care to understand).

## CONCLUSION

Each of article unfolds stories and reflections of coming and leaving in this special issue. One overarching theme across all narratives is the authors laughed, cried, learned, grew, reflected, developed, and finally found something special and unique within their multiple identities and diverse experiences in foreign countries around the world. These were not necessarily experienced by domestic students. We hope that by sharing these experiences and genuine voices they can

speak to current international students and scholars so they too can reflect on their own stories and voices of coming and leaving. Whether they also crying, laughing, learning, growing, reflecting, or developing as they find something unique and special within themselves and their journeys.

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