

Studying Abroad: What International Graduate Students Experience at a Seminary in South Korea

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Many people leave their home countries and go abroad for higher education. For Korea,¹ “studying abroad” traditionally meant Korean students going abroad to study. However, the meaning of “studying abroad” for Koreans has changed slightly due to the growing number of foreign students entering Korea for higher education. According to recent statistics reported by the Korea Immigration Service (2011), the number of international students in Korea reached 90,926 as of the end of October 2011. With the increasing number of international students on the campuses of Korean universities, many problems related to international students have been reported (Ryu, 2011), forcing some to leave Korea with disappointment and without having accomplished their purposes. Being a host country for international students, it is important for Korea to support international students who are studying here. For this, Korean universities and Korean society at large need to understand the challenges and needs of international students.

Founded as a mission-centered seminary in Seoul, Korea, the institution selected for the present study has underscored educating international students. The seminary uses English as its official language of operation and for the majority of the school’s program. International students, especially special scholarship students, are the core members of the community and the institution had placed great emphasis on this program. According to the official school website, the special scholarship program is “an integral part” of the institution’s “mission to train and equip Christian leaders for those regions least penetrated by the gospel”

1. For the purposes of this paper, the terms “Korea” or “Koreans” will refer to the Republic of Korea (i.e., South Korea).

(Torch Trinity Graduate University, 2011, para. 1 under the Strategic Mission Education section). The special scholarship students are carefully selected and trained to be Christian leaders so that they may be well equipped and prepared to serve people in their home countries after they finish their studies in Korea and return home. As current special scholarship students are the future leaders of their home countries, it is important for the entire school community to realize the value of those students and to support them.

Even though the seminary has been educating special scholarship students for more than a decade, there have been no studies on understanding their specific needs and challenges. In addition, there are few studies on understanding international students in Korea even though their number has been increasing rapidly (Korea Immigration Service, 2011). There have been some studies on international undergraduate students (Kim, 2010; Lee, 2008) and international students that have included both undergraduate and graduate students (Kim, 2009; Kwon, 2008; Lee, 2011; Park, 2008), but as of this date, there has been no study focused on these particular international graduate students, especially seminary students in Korea. This study may contribute to filling the gap.

The purpose of the study was to support international students so that they may successfully complete their studies and have enriched experiences during their stay here. In order to support these international students effectively, it is necessary to understand their challenges and needs, and to keep in mind their own perceived levels of satisfaction. Recommendations for the entire community of the institution are suggested to better work in collaboration with them.

The main research question is: What do the international graduate students experience at a particular Korean seminary? The subsidiary questions are: What struggles are they facing? What needs do they have? And what areas are they satisfied with?

Review of Relevant Literature

In order to successfully complete their studies, international students have to first adjust to the new environment. They have to adapt to new social, cultural, academic and physical environments. This section will review relevant literature on the issues that international students deal with while studying abroad. The main issues influencing international students include academic performance, language fluency, acculturative stress, financial problem and social support (Selvadurai, 1998; Sherry, Thomas & Chui, 2010).

Academic Performance

The academic performance of international students depends largely on language ability, educational experience, and academic skills. Many scholars report that the host country's language proficiency is a crucial factor affecting the academic achievement of international students (Brown, 2008; Li, Chen & Duanmu, 2009; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000). Li, Chen and Duanmu (2009) studied determinants of international students' academic performance using a sample of 178 international students in the United Kingdom. From this study, they found that English writing ability was the key predictor for international students' ability to succeed in their studies.

However, the association between language ability and academic performance is inconclusive. Zhang and Mi (2010) found that language problems were neither persistent nor widespread in academic performance. While language-related problems during their academic studies were typically encountered by international students, a survey and interview of 40 Chinese students at eight Australian universities found that language problems or stress differed depending on the duration of study and the discipline. After two years of study in English as international students, language problems did not confine students in their studies. Even with less than two years of study, the students were little influenced by language problems for the linguistically less demanding courses such as graphic design, accounting, IT and civil engineering.

In addition to language, academic cultural differences also affect the academic performance of international students. Brown (2008) studied causes of academic stress for international students in a graduate program in the United Kingdom. Using interviews and participant observation, the researcher found that differences between the host and original countries' academic cultures were sources of additional stress for international students in their academic performance. Academic cultural differences were found in learning resources, approaches to writing and referencing, critical thinking, and participation in discussion. Those who came from countries that did not use computers for study felt pressured in having to use word processors and the Internet for academic work. Some had difficulty following the Harvard system of referencing or other unfamiliar citation styles used by the university. Critical thinking was especially challenging for students from cultures that were uncomfortable with critical exchange and contradiction. Participation in discussion was an overwhelming demand for those from countries where education is teacher-centered.

According to Kwon (2008), international students in Korea experienced academic challenges due to different teaching styles, different

school systems and unprofessional administrators. Regarding the teaching style, the international students expressed negative opinions on the one-way communication style, most often in lecturing. The atmosphere of the class was not amenable to asking questions to the professors. Even students from China preferred discussion-style classrooms rather than the straight lecturing style. An inadequate orientation process also contributed to the problems of academic achievement and adjustment for international students.

Acculturation

Acculturation is defined as “the process of culture change and adaptation that occurs when individuals with different cultures come into contact” (Gibson, 2001, p. 19). Language fluency is important in acculturation as well. Yeh and Inose (2003) studied the acculturative stress of international students in the United States. A total of 359 international students from diverse regions were asked to complete a questionnaire. They found that those who reported higher English fluency had lower levels of acculturative distress. They attributed this to smoother interactions with majority group members of the host country, easing their stress in adapting to the culture.

Acculturative stress is experienced more by students from cultures that have greater differences with the host cultures. Yeh and Inose (2003), who studied international students in the United States, found that students from Europe were significantly less likely to experience acculturative stress than students from Asia, Africa and Latin/Central America. They explained that the European students, who comprised all of the Caucasians in that sample, may have encountered less racism and discrimination and were thus able to fit in more easily to American society. In addition, they “may have experienced less of a contrast in cultural patterns of behavior and value systems—allowing for a smoother adjustment in their daily interactions” (p. 23). Social support and social connectedness were also important in acculturation. Especially for students from cultures that emphasize interdependence and close connections, the satisfaction in a social or support network was significantly related with acculturation.

International students with families have more acculturative stresses. Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko, and Lu (2011) studied the acculturative stress of married international students. The researchers interviewed 31 international graduate students or spouses with at least one child. In addition to the stress generally experienced by international students, the researchers found that the students with families experienced unique additional stress factors including feeling overwhelmed

with child-rearing in a different culture, experiencing marital stress, balancing multiple roles, and worrying about one's spouse. The stress of the non-student spouse included loss of role and status, power imbalance in couple relationships and feelings of inadequacy.

From the study of international students in Korea, Kwon (2008) found that problems related to homesickness, loneliness and acculturation were relatively mild, attributing this to globalization that has arisen from developments in the Internet, communications and international exchanges of economy and culture. She also found that the international students during short-period stays in Korea had more difficulties than those who stayed longer. For the international students in Korea, both Korean and English languages were related to acculturation. That is, some students had difficulties acculturating due to a lack of proficiency in both Korean and English. Kim (2009) also found that proficiency in Korean language was related with low acculturative stress by collecting data from international students at a university in Korea.

Financial Problems

Financial problems are another issue that international students experience. Unless students are fully financed for tuition, living costs and pocket money, they will find it difficult to support themselves in a foreign country. Sherry, Thomas, and Chui (2010) found that the majority of participants in their study experienced financial difficulties while at an overseas university. The students who did not experience financial problems were those who were fully supported through graduate assistantships or financial aid. International students with families experienced more financial adversity because they had to share limited resources with their families while supporting themselves (Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko, & Lu, 2011).

From the qualitative study of international students at two universities in Seoul, Korea, Kwon (2008) found that many international students encountered difficulties in dealing with the high cost of living in Korea compared to their home countries. She asserted that financial difficulty was the greatest problem for international students. Even those who had received scholarships from the school and worked part time expressed the saliency of financial hardships due to Korea's high living costs.

Method

Research Design

This is a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The methods utilized in this study were survey, focus group, and interviews. Survey is a quantitative research method, and the focus group and interviews are qualitative research methods.

Participants

Out of 27 special scholarship students at the seminary selected for the present study, 25 students participated in the survey. More male students participated (16 males as opposed to 9 females) and there were more single than married participants (19 single and 6 married students). Regarding age, the 31-35 years old range had the highest number. Those from Southeast Asia comprised the largest group. More than half were in the Master of Divinity program. Almost half of the participants were second year students (Table 1).

Table 1: *Demographic Characteristics of Survey Participants*

	Category	Number	Percent
Gender	Male	16	64%
	Female	9	36%
Marital Status	Married	6	24%
	Single	19	76%
Age	Less than 26	5	20%
	Between 26 and 30	5	20%
	Between 31 and 35	8	32%
	Between 36 and 40	5	20%
	More than 40	2	8%
Region	Southeast Asia	11	44%
	Western Asia	7	28%
	East Asia	2	8%
	Central Asia	2	8%
	Africa	3	12%
Program	Master of Arts	7	28%
	Master of Divinity	13	52%
	Master of Theology	5	20%
School Year	1st year	10	40%
	2nd year	12	48%
	3rd year	3	12%

Of the survey participants, six students were selected as focus group participants to delve into their experiences at the institution more deeply. This was a mixed group in terms of gender, program, year and region. After consulting faculty and staff who have worked closely with special scholarship students, six participants were selected for the interviews.

Instrument

For the survey, a questionnaire was developed that was adapted from the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994). The questionnaire developed for this study was somewhat unique in that it assessed the specific characteristics of the international students at the seminary. In deciding the domains to include in the questionnaire, the interview results with the faculty and staff were considered. After developing the questionnaire, a pilot study was conducted with two international students who resided in the dormitory but were not the special scholarship students. It was then revised as necessary.

The questionnaire was divided into three parts. The first part consisted of 60 questions and assessed the experience of students. Domains of the first part of the questionnaire included acculturative stress, academic difficulty, financial problems, relational stress, stress related to the future, stress related to ministry, and experience at the seminary. The second part collected their demographic information: gender, marital status, age, region, program, and school year. The third part provided an open space for participants to write freely about experiences they considered important as international students. The survey questionnaire used a 5-point Likert-type scale with 1 being "Strongly disagree" and 5 being "Strongly agree." The following are some sample questions: "If I am having difficulty, I have someone with whom I can share;" "People treat me badly or differently because I appear/look different;" "I have an appropriate amount of guidance from my supervisor in my ministry;" and "I love the food in the cafeteria."

Procedure

Data from the survey and the focus group was collected in July 2011. Participants of the survey were asked to complete the questionnaire. After the survey, six focus group participants selected from among the survey participants were assembled and asked to state their own experiences in detail. Interviews were conducted with professors and staff who worked closely with the international students from June to November 2011.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were coded and analyzed. For the present study, the mean scores, ranges, and standard deviations of each domain were calculated. The data of focus group and interviews were transcribed and analyzed using NVivo 9. Common and recurrent themes as well as similar phrases and patterns were sorted and grouped. The results of the qualitative data analysis were then compared again with the findings from the quantitative data.

Results

Survey Results

International students' average stress scores ranged from 2.67 to 3.91 on a scale with 1 being "most stressful," 5 being "not very stressful," and 3 being "neutral" (see Table 2 for the average stress scores and the range of stress scores from the lowest to the highest in each area). Overall, the stress levels of international students do not seem to be high considering that all scores were above 2.5. Financial problems and academic difficulty were the only two areas where some stress may be experienced more strongly by the international students. Among stress related to acculturation, students experienced some level of stress related to Korean language ($M=2.23$), homesickness ($M=2.26$), and to a lesser degree, weather ($M=2.72$), food ($M=2.86$), and hobbies ($M=2.96$). On the other hand, international students tend to not experience stress related to their general experiences of school, future, and relationships. As indicated in the range of the scores, there appear to be some students who experience greater levels of stress and difficulty in areas such as acculturation, academic difficulty and relational stress.

Table 2: *International Students' Stress Levels*

Areas	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range
Acculturative Stress	3.17	0.677	1.83-4.21
Academic Difficulty	2.84	0.787	1.63-4.21
Financial Problem	2.67	0.317	2.17-2.92
Concerns related to Future	3.62	0.819	3.00-4.21
Relational Stress	3.58	0.518	2.25-4.21
Stress related to School Life	3.91	0.311	3.54-4.50
Stress related to Ministry	3.24	0.620	2.65-4.00

Note. *M* = Mean, *SD* = Standard Deviation

In an open section of the questionnaire where the participants could write freely about their experiences, students reported both positive and challenging experiences. The positive experiences included academic experience, opportunities as special scholarship students, and involvement in the international community. Challenging experiences included concerns for married students, family issues and dormitory life such as the lack of a quiet place for prayer, roommate difficulties, inability to cook, and weekly devotions. It was also reported that special scholarship students may feel burdened by expectations from other organizations other than the school. English language occasionally not being used in class by the Korean students was also reported. Their suggestions included opening a Korean language class, being assigned a mentor, and having access to a more detailed orientation.

Focus Group and Interview Results

Based on the focus group and interviews, the international students' positive and negative experiences were reported as follows:

Positive experiences.

Scholarships and the opportunity to study. Many international students expressed the chance to study in Korea on a scholarship as a major life event for which they were most appreciative. They felt that this was a great opportunity and did not appear to take this for granted. For the opportunities provided for them, there is a sense of gratitude as well as a sense of responsibility to share what they gained with other people who did not have the opportunity. They even remained grateful despite the lengthy and challenging application process that they had to undergo before they were actually allowed to arrive. Their experiences were also expressed in terms of their relationship with God. Some of the students' statements are as follows (despite grammatical errors, most student statements have been left as they were written):

"I find it as a great opportunity that God has granted me to come and study here.....I don't just take it for granted."

"I'm really grateful to God and because this is really...something I don't deserve but God grant[ed] and also realize that in that [it is] big blessing...there is also responsibilities."

"It's such a privilege that I got."

"To provide full scholarship to the students like not only one or two but

a dozen students is something amazing.”

“To get a full scholarship that’s a really big thing.”

International community with diverse cultural groups. The international students indicated that having international students from diverse cultural groups was a very positive aspect in their lives. Although each student’s level of exposure to cultural diversity prior to coming to the institution is not clear, having an international community appeared to be a very positive experience for many of them.

“It’s a good place to learn, and to appreciate other people’s cultures and differences.”

“One thing I like is the international community where it’s very international in nature even though it’s in Korea...”

“When we sing and praise the same God... we are from the different background... so during that time I feel like I can imagine how the heaven is.”

Learning environment. The international students reported positive experiences related to the learning environment including facilities, learning resources, professors, and academic progress. Even though the academic demands were challenging, they were grateful that resources were available through library and personal help. They reported academic gains and preparedness for further study as positives.

“In that [academic] difficulty, I still find help [and] resources because we are connected to Internet... So human resources, the facilities... it’s really helpful to continue to study.”

“Especially I appreciate the teaching here.”

“I was trying to do my best and it helps me a lot now.”

“Professors are good at their specialization in what they teach and they are friendly. We just feel welcome.”

“I also want to appreciate each professor. Each subject very professional, knows the subject very well and knows the passion to the subject.”

“One thing that I like.... is because [...] the professors and library.”

Living environment. The international students also reported positive experiences related to their living environment. They appreciated the dormitory’s family-like atmosphere and the supportive relationships

found there. The dormitory is located adjacent to the school building and the cafeteria is open year-round for the international students.

“Living in the dormitory we don’t even realize we came from different countries.”

“Some of the friends can share good and bad both.”

“The dorm is also so comfortable. Everything is like just so nice for me.”

“We are close to each other, we share...we encourage each other.”

“We don’t need to worry about anything... there are also everything.”

Growth experience. One of the senior students strongly expressed his conviction that studying at the institution was a growth experience, both emotionally and spiritually, by overcoming initial struggles. Although it was difficult in the beginning, he seemed to appreciate what he had gained through those trials.

“In the beginning I used to complain....but through those kind of struggle I learned a lot....This is a great opportunity to learn and to train more.”

Others. The international students in general expressed satisfaction with the institution and the opportunities they had. Some of the comments include:

“[Institution] didn’t disappoint me. I mean what I expected was there.”

“I am happy about the [institution] life in general.”

“And through the Ambassador project...we visited many churches and we presented....that challenged especially me to be focused more on mission.”

“The facility and academic wise is for me so very very good place.”

“They [students] are sensitive to others and.... they consider foreign friends’ needs first than theirs.”

As indicated above, there is a general sense of satisfaction and gratitude among the international students. However, they were not exempted from facing challenges related to academic difficulty, cultural adjustment, scholarship expectations, financial problems, and relational areas. In the Table 3, international students’ statements related to the challenges are presented.

Challenges reported.

Challenges related to cultural adjustment. International students experience many challenges related to cultural adjustment.

Food. With the exception of the Western-style food offered at breakfast, the cafeteria served Korean meals which tend to be spicy and rice-based and thus presented a quandary for some international students. Some were exposed to chopsticks for the first time and thus did not know how to use them properly. Most students wished to have more freedom to cook and store their own food in addition to what was already provided in the dormitory. Although some students learned to adapt to the Korean food served in the cafeteria, other students reported continued difficulty in adjusting to Korean food throughout their stay.

Korean language and culture. The international students reported having linguistic hindrances due to their lack of capacity to understand the Korean language both within and outside the campus. Although the institution is an international community, international students quickly encountered the reality that Korean language was often used in everyday conversation, and that this could be stressful. Also, when equipment such as computers and copy machines did not have instructions in English, it added to the frustration. Off campus, they felt even greater levels of stress for not knowing the Korean language, and they felt the need to learn basic survival Korean language skills and culture, including how to use public transportation and how to purchase basic necessities at a store.

Homesickness. The international students usually experienced some level of homesickness. A few students, however, experienced homesickness at a level that created great academic and emotional turmoil for them. These particular students felt lonely and missed their family and homes very much.

Discrimination. The international students reported that they experienced discrimination from the general public, and some also felt discriminated against when they sought opportunities for ministry and/or work in Korea. Although Korea as a nation is developing as a multicultural society, it's clear that prejudice against foreigners remains. Prejudice and discrimination inevitably produces distress for the international students.

Weather. For some international students, the weather conditions of Korea created difficulties in adjustment. For example, students from tropical regions may have experienced difficulty adjusting to the cold winters in Korea.

Orientation. Many international students reported trials during the initial adjustment period because the orientation session did not

adequately address their needs. They reported that it would have been helpful to have received more detailed information and guidance such as where to buy office supplies (stationery) and basic necessities, how to use the cafeteria, how to find a church, how to use the school's online system, and how to use library. One senior student reported that he personally offered such guidance to a junior student at an individual level, but other students who did not have such personal guidance felt at a loss in finding out how to perform these necessary functions and tasks by themselves.

Academic challenges. All of the international students except one reported academic pressure due to the high academic standards, the required GPA (grade-point-average) system, and the school's academic system which differed from their home country. One student reported that his own evaluation of the academic work and the professors' evaluation revealed a great discrepancy. Another student discovered too late that he was expected to have already completed some academic work prior to his matriculation. This, of course, raises academic challenges. In addition, given that all classes are taught in the school's official language of English, many of the students who were not academically trained in English found themselves in academic adversity. In addition, Korean language used during class breaks and/or Korean students' questions in Korean added to the frustration of other non-Korean speaking students who felt left out and distanced from their Korean classmates.

Financial challenges. The international students seem to have financial burdens. Although scholarships for tuition and room and board are provided, international students are expected to take responsibility for their personal costs. This creates a great challenge to provide an optimal academic environment for them. The special scholarship students at this institution are not permitted to work, and they often do not seem to have an official channel through which they can easily attain access to basic necessities. In addition, some students, especially those who are married, seem to be concerned about their families back home, adding a greater burden financially. When they are overly concerned about their financial situation, it is also reported that the international students can lose focus on their studies, resulting in a lack of academic progress. The international students in general appear to experience financial challenges. However, the extent of the challenge experienced seems to vary from person to person.

Challenges related to relationships. The international students may experience conflicts in relationships due to their diverse cultural backgrounds and living in a small community where students constantly live and study in close proximity with one another. In addition to conflictual relationships that arise such as roommate conflicts, building supportive

relationships may also be challenging for some international students. When students fail to build supportive relationships, they may experience increased alienation and loneliness. In addition, dating relationships also may bring about complications for unmarried students.

Challenges related to scholarship expectations and organizational issues. The international students reported experiencing challenges related to expectations for special scholarship students. There are many expectations laid out for these students, especially for married students who arrive in Korea to study alone without their spouse or children. Some of the expectations were exacerbated when information was not clearly delivered to the students. For example, one student’s understanding of financial support was different from the actual situation that this student encountered upon arrival. Furthermore, organizations involved with international students’ education and trainings do not seem to be well-coordinated at the time of this study was conducted. This resulted in unnecessary confusion and frustration among the international students.

Other challenges. There are a number of other challenges reported. Limited facilities for entertainment and recreational opportunities, health problems such as frequent headaches and colds, emotional challenges such as self-doubt, lack of confidence, and disappointment in self, moral concerns, and personal challenges such as laziness were all cited as challenges facing international students.

Table 3: *International Students’ Challenges*

Areas	Some Examples of Students’ Statements
Cultural Adjustment	<p>“Some cultures are not used to eating rice all the time and then spicy food.”</p> <p>“Some people cook especially the South-Asians. When we cook, we put in the microwave for 30 min. and cook. Sometimes when we really miss home food we do that.” [indicates other people could not use the microwave]</p> <p>“The common room does not have a sink and it gets really messy.”</p> <p>“A lot of students just listen to the lecture in English and rest of the time using Korean.....I feel some kind of barrier between.”</p> <p>“Even when we come to duty, make copy, and sometimes we face some problems [with photocopy machine written in Korean] we don’t know what to do.”</p> <p>“Every international student desperately needs Korean.”</p> <p>“When we get out of the fence, wow[,] we need Korean.”</p> <p>“Later I discovered maybe there are some things that were not addressed during the orientation time.”</p>

Academic	<p>“I think most of us struggle a lot because the system is different.”</p> <p>“The best things we have done is not enough.”</p> <p>“This kind of education system, it was the first time.... when I saw all the... requirements and marks that we have to [do] to maintain the grade....that made me so pressured.”</p> <p>“I feel the pressure.”</p> <p>“It’s a good pressure but it may cause some damage sometimes.”</p> <p>“I feel also find difficulty in studying in English.”</p> <p>“When I went through 1st semester, I had a really very hard time because of my English ability.”</p> <p>“I don’t really mind but sometimes I feel left out, I mean I have to go out sometimes because the professor and the students start talking in Korean.”</p>
Financial	<p>“Korea is very expensive. Life is very very expensive. So you find that it’s really hard. It’s very challenging for some people.”</p> <p>“You can’t work and you don’t have ministry so you don’t have any source of income....I came with Korean won, it is consumed in a week.”</p>
Scholarship & Organizational	<p>“I think the information was wrongly given to me.....I was not at the very best or wasn’t a good beginning with the meeting, they did not clarify the part.”</p> <p>“The rule set it so I didn’t do it.....they [students] know that they[students] are going to struggle if such a rule is implemented uniformly to everyone.”</p> <p>“I feel that there is a very big gap between the school and [other organization].”</p>
Other	<p>“I wish there is more place for entertainment.”</p> <p>“I was thinking, ‘Am I the right person to be here?’ I was questioning myself and I also had a lot of struggles spiritually and emotionally.”</p> <p>“The only challenge is my laziness.”</p>

Suggestions from Study Participants

Although it was not the researchers’ intention to seek solutions for these many challenges, the participants naturally provided many suggestions during the focus group and interviews. Some of the suggestions included the following: (a) a mentoring system to assist with cultural adjustment especially during the first year; (b) an office or system to handle international students’ affairs including working with the Korean Immigration Office; (c) a more thorough and comprehensive orientation; (d) coordination with ministry training organizations and clear

guidelines; (e) psychoeducation of culture; (f) an overall reevaluation of the special scholarship program and policies; (g) Korean language classes and basic survival skills training program; (h) increased capacity for cooking/food preparation; and (j) easy to access assistance for financially challenged students. Most of the suggestions, if not all, seem to be appropriate and should be considered.

Discussion

The international students are an important part of the school. The institution in this study clearly states that it is their mission to “train and equip Christian leaders,” and for that reason, those international students were invited to study here. The international students’ experiences in this study should be considered in the context of this institution and should not be overgeneralized to all international students in Korea. Overall, the international students’ level of stress was not significant in that most scores were close to the neutral point on a stress-no stress continuum. The international students have had many positive experiences. At the same time, the negative and/or challenging experiences were also clearly experienced.

Among many positive experiences, the international students’ opportunity to study with scholarship seems to be most significant. Often, international students arrive from underrepresented countries, and they therefore approach this opportunity to study with gratitude. The international students see themselves as “special” or “specially chosen” to come abroad to study. The sense of gratitude and appreciation appears to be a foundation upon which all their other experiences are built. The study opportunity they have undertaken is regarded as invaluable.

However, international students are also faced hurdles such as high academic pressure, an unfamiliar educational system, and studying in the English language. Challenges experienced due to English language may be unique to this institution. Most other institutions in Korea use Korean language for instruction. This study finding of the academic challenges is consistent with Brown (2003) in which academic cultural differences increase international students’ distress. Furthermore, despite the resources that could help the international students cope with academic challenges, this study opportunity also created self-doubt, disappointment in self, and lack of confidence at least during the initial period of adjustment. The international students were challenged academically, and this may have also brought about emotional challenges.

In addition, the international students’ experiences in this particular institution can generally be divided into two categories: within

the school and outside the school. First, within the school, the international students were part of a close-knit international community where they felt very comfortable and appreciative of the diverse cultural atmosphere. Outside the school environs, however, international students acutely felt the being perceived as minorities in Korean society and sometimes experienced discrimination and/or mistreatment by native Koreans who regarded them as foreigners from underdeveloped or developing countries. Second, communication was conducted in English language for official school activities. Although the international students' proficiency in English and their stress involved with communication varied, their difficulty in communication increased greatly when they ventured off campus where Korean language was used primarily, if not solely, in their interactions with the general populace. Just as the international students indicated that the use of Korean language caused some level of distress during classes and breaks, one can assume that their level of stress related to their lack of proficiency in Korean would naturally increase when they traveled outside the school. This is similar with Yeh and Inose (2003)'s finding that a higher level of language fluency decreases acculturative distress for the international students. Third, within the school, the international students are considered to be an integral part of the community. It can be assumed that adaption to the school culture is relatively easy given that members of the school all share the same faith tradition and there is a general respect for international students. While differences in diverse cultural backgrounds may be challenging at times, the cultural gap experienced by international students is greater and noticeably different when they leave the school environs, especially for those who come from countries located farther away from Korea. The international students' experience both within and outside the school should be considered when acculturative stress is concerned.

In general, the international students of this study seem to have adequate social support. Social support and social connectedness are considered to be very important for the acculturation process of international students (Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko, & Lu, 2011). Many international students in this study identified social support and relationships as positive. This may contribute to a general sense of well-being reported in this study. However, there seems to be some international students who experienced greater levels of difficulty and stress than other students. This study did not focus on identifying risk factors for international students' adjustment difficulties and increased stress experiences. However, an individual international student's level of stress seems to vary as indicated in the range of scores in the survey study.

It appears that some students experience a greater level of difficulty in given areas. For example, general acculturative stress seems to be greater for those students who came from countries that were geographically farther away and which greatly differed from Korean culture in such areas as food, weather, and cultural values. This finding is similar with Yeh and Inose (2003)'s study results which posited that acculturative stress is influenced by differences between the students' culture and the host culture. Furthermore, the international students with limited social skills and coping skills would have more difficulty than those who possessed such skills. As reported, students with limited social skills may experience difficulty building relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds. Since personal resources and strengths are not readily identifiable before challenges are experienced, the international students themselves may realize their limited resources and skills as they come to study abroad and face the challenges directly. In other words, personal resources such as social skills and coping skills may influence how they respond to challenges.

In addition to the consideration of the risk factors of international students, one should also consider challenges related at the organizational level. The international students indicated that the lack of clear communication from and between organizations produced stress. When the international students had many questions and unresolved feelings toward policies, regulations, and other organizational issues, they tended to experience increased levels of stress and difficulty. Effective communication among organizations and students is needed.

Another area of consideration is financial difficulty. Sherry, Thomas, & Chui (2010) and Kwon (2008) also indicated that the financial issues were formidable for international students. The international students of this study are provided with tuition and room and board, but they are required to provide for other necessities such as textbooks and personal items on their own. As one student voiced, the living cost of Seoul may be much higher than the living costs of their home countries. Their capacity to provide for themselves appears to be very limited even though their living costs as international students is minimal from the perspective of the host country's standards. According to the survey results, financial difficulty is one area where all international students experienced some level of stress. It is worthy to note, on the other hand, that the fact these special scholarship students do not bring their families with them may save themselves from additional stress related to the acculturation and financial difficulties of the family members (Myers-Walls, Frias, Kwon, Ko, & Lu, 2011).

The international students' experiences include both satisfaction and challenges. The participants of this study were able to provide many

suggestions for improvements in the lives of the international students. Taking into consideration the suggestions provided, the researchers of this study would like to recommend the following. First, provision of additional support, both academic and emotional, for those students who experience great academic difficulty early on would be helpful. Academic challenges can also cause emotional turmoil for international students. Therefore, taking into consideration the international students' academic culture, specific support in the areas of writing, critical thinking, and group discussion would be beneficial. Second, a more detailed and practical guide to enhance cultural adaptation during orientation is needed. The focus should be on the provision of education and training for both within the school and outside the school, since there are relatively large cultural differences that require adaptation. Third, coordination among all organizations involved with international students is needed. Organizations should provide consistent information, feedback and clear communication. For example, since practical field training for theological students is significant, there should be an effort to provide training opportunities for international students who face obstacles such as discrimination and limited ministry opportunities. Fourth, there may be some international students who are at greater risk for increased levels of stress in particular areas. Early identification of such at-risk students and provisions for additional support and services would be helpful. This should be done in a culturally sensitive manner that considers the international students' help-seeking behaviors and cultural values. Programs such as mentoring that is free of stigmas and additional general support services open to all may serve the purpose. Fifth, consideration for the international students' financial situation and attempts to solve it at the community level might entail financial support in order to help international students successfully complete their studies.

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