Transition to an Unfamiliar Environment: International Students’ Living Experiences in an Australian Regional Area

Dr Yun Yue,
Research Fellow, Beijing University, China

Quynh Lê and Daniel R. Terry
University Department of Rural Health
University of Tasmania

Abstract

Transition to an unfamiliar environment is a complex process. Many previous studies have paid more attention to international students’ sociocultural adaptation than their basic living conditions and healthy behaviours. In fact, these factors are also closely associated with international students’ physical and psychological wellbeing. The study, in the context of a university in a regional area in Australia, examined international students’ satisfaction with their basic living conditions, as well as assessed their healthy behaviours to give important insights into international students’ basic living experience in Australia. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect qualitative data in this study. Twenty international students were invited to give their insights and perceptions of their life in regional Australia. The study found that accommodation, transport, financial and food and diet are the four main considerations related to international students’ basic living satisfaction.

Introduction

There has been a rapid increase in the numbers of international students in Australia from 1994 to 2012, as Australia is one of the most popular destinations for international students due to its high education reputation and advanced educational systems. (AEI, 2012). According to Australian Education International (AEI, 2011), in 2010 there were 619,119 full-fee paying international student visa holders enrolled in Australia. Amongst these international students, 39.3% were enrolled in higher education with 56.2% undertaking undergraduate study (AEI, 2010). Despite the positive contribution which international students make, both financially and culturally to Australia, they have a propensity to experience many challenges as they migrate to, live and study in Australia. The focus of this paper is to provide some insight into a number of general living challenges international students experience as they attempt to adjust and transition to their new environment.

International students have become a highly visible population within Australia and the health and wellbeing of this cohort has attracted much attention of governments, educational institutions and scholars from various disciplines. As a group, international students are at a high risk of experiencing physical and psychological difficulties in the process of adjustment to their new environment (Mori, 2000; Ward, Leong, & Low, 2004; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). This susceptibility to experiencing poor physical and psychological health, or what Forbes-Mewett and Nyland (2008) coin as ‘security’, is related to four major adjustment challenges which international students encounter (Bock, 2008). These include general living adjustment, academic adjustment, social-cultural adjustment and personal psychological adjustment (Hechanova-Alampay, Bechr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010; Porter, 1993; Tseng & Newton, 2002).

General living adjustment includes basic living problems encountered by international students in their daily life such as accommodation, transport, financial and adjustment to different food and diet (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007; Mori, 2000; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006; Ward & Masgoret, 2004; Williams, 2007). These are generally not considered significant problems in an international student’s home country; however in a completely new environment they have the potential to become overwhelming and can impact on international
students' physical health and psychological wellbeing (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007; Mori, 2000; Rosenthal et al., 2006; Ward & Masgoret, 2004; Williams, 2007).

Within the literature, it has been shown that the quality of accommodation directly influences international students' health and wellbeing. According to Ward and Masgoret (2004) and Rosenthal et al. (2006), students who lived in their own home, with family members and relatives were most satisfied with their accommodation. Additionally, students who lodged in home stays were more satisfied than those who lived in rental accommodation or student hostels, who were the least satisfied. Most importantly, students with the highest level of satisfaction with their accommodation had significantly lower levels of stress, depression and anxiety, than those who had low satisfaction.

The cost of accommodation is another factor related to international students' satisfaction. According to Khawaja and Dempsey (2007), there is a scarcity of affordable housing for international students in Australia. Therefore, rising costs and dissatisfaction toward accommodation may increase international students' financial and psychological stress (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2007).

In Williams's (2007) study, the absence of adequate public transportation or access to a car was problematic for some Asian students, as it would result in a dependency on others and cause them great inconvenience. Accessibility and quality of service were two criteria related to their evaluation of transportation. In addition, it has been identified that safety, affordability and public transit services are three factors that have an impact on the use of public transport by international students (Benjamin, 2009; Dora & Phillips, 2000; Farhang & Bhatia, 2005). Where there are high transportation costs, fear of violence, unreliability of schedules, lengthy transit routes with multiple transfers and long waiting times, stress can result. This has a direct relationship to physical and mental health outcomes, such as tiredness, depression and anxiety (Farhang & Bhatia, 2005).

Financial concerns are commonly identified as one of the greatest sources of stress for international students (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Mullins, Quintrell, & Hancock, 1995). Adequate finances are essential for the acquisition of education, food and shelter (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008). Increasing tuition fees and living expenses have been identified as key sources of financial stress (Chen, 1999). In addition, little or no access to welfare benefits, scholarships and loans all increase the financial pressure on international students (Lin & Yi, 1997). The study conducted by Rosenthal et al. (2006) found that students who were mainly supported by family finances were less worried about money than those students who were supported by other sources, such as savings, employment, scholarship or financial loan.

Food and diet has a direct influence on a person's health. Due to differences in diet and concepts of nutrition, most international students have difficulties in adapting to the local food and cooking style. Due to the lack of family support and encouragement, some students develop unhealthy diet practices such as skipping breakfast and increased snacking (Ramakrishna & Weiss, 1992). The study conducted by Rosenthal, et al. (2006) revealed a relationship between financial resources and the students' perception of nutritional balance.

Method

The study aimed to investigate international students' basic living status in an Australian regional area and identify some key issues affecting their basic living conditions.

In order to have a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of international students' living conditions in an Australian rural area, the authors of this study collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews. Five university staff members, who had extensive contact with international students and twenty international students, who had been studying in an Australian regional area for six months or more, were invited to participate in an interview (tables 1 and 2).
Interviews were audio recorded and conducted face-to-face (see Appendix 1 and 2 – interview schedules). The interviewer asked follow-up questions to elaborate on initial answers. The study employed a purposive sampling method, where individuals and groups are selected according to certain selection criteria to ensure richness of data collected and to reduce bias within a small sample (Tongco, 2007). These criteria included university staff members who had a large amount of contact with international students; international students who had been studying on-campus at the university for more than six months; and other demographic factors which were also taken into account in the process of recruitment, such as gender, age, country of origin, academic faculty and degree currently pursuing.

Table 1: Staff backgrounds

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Staff members</th>
<th>Number of cases (N=5)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
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<td>Science</td>
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<td>Business</td>
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<td>Administrative staff</td>
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<td>Campus one</td>
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<td>Campus two</td>
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Table 2: Student backgrounds

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<th>Number of cases (N=20)</th>
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<td>Gender</td>
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<td>- Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Female</td>
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<td>Age groups</td>
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<td>- Under 20</td>
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<tr>
<td>- 20-24</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Over 24</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Country of origin</td>
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<td>- Mainland China</td>
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<td>- Korea</td>
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<td>- Iran</td>
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Table 2: Student backgrounds (cont'd)

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<tr>
<th>Student</th>
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<tr>
<td>Humanities</td>
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<td>Health Science</td>
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<td>Business</td>
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<td>Degrees currently pursuing</td>
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<td>Undergraduate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Postgraduate by coursework</td>
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<td>Postgraduate by research</td>
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<tr>
<td>Length of stay (up to the present)</td>
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<td>6 months to 12 months</td>
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<td>Over one year to two years</td>
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<td>Over two years to four years</td>
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<td>Over four years</td>
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Audio data was transcribed into text and entered into the computer-aided qualitative data analysis software NVivo (version 8). With the systematic data analysis, two cycles of coding were undertaken to make participants' views and thoughts explicit so as to explore in-depth their insights. The first coding cycle was an initial coding process. With the use of NVivo (Version 8), the researcher read the transcripts carefully, sentence by sentence, and then placed the relevant meaning units into the appropriate coding group. In addition, new codes were created when new meanings which did not fit any existing coding groups were encountered.

The second cycle of coding was then undertaken. At this stage, analytic skills such as classifying, integrating, abstracting, and conceptualizing were utilized to explore the deeper relationship between the codes produced from the first and second cycles. Along with this identified relationship, hierarchical structures were established and themes gradually emerged from the sets of data. Four key themes emerged from the qualitative data, with the relationship between these themes providing an explicit understanding of the main barriers to positive adjustment to the new environment for international students.

Discussion on Findings

Accommodation

Three salient issues relating to accommodation emerged from the set of data: types of accommodation and costs, accommodation location, and relationships with housemates and/or landlords.

Types of accommodation and economic considerations

There were four main types of accommodation mentioned by the participants. These are “shared house”, “living with family or other relatives”, “homestay” and “hostel”. Among these, “shared house” emerged as the most common type of accommodation, in that eleven out of the twenty student participants were living in this type of accommodation. Most of these had chosen a shared living place for economic reasons. Compared with other types of accommodation, a shared house is the cheapest. As one participant said, “I was living in home stay before, the price was nearly $200, but this shared house cost only $85, much cheaper than the home stay.” (Vietnamese female student)

Most students who choose to live in homestay are below 18 years of age. According to Australian Immigration policy (IMMI, 2011), international students who are less than 18 years of age must have acceptable arrangements for their accommodation, support and general welfare for the
duration of their student visa or until they turn 18. Hence, homestay is the legal option if they don’t have family they can live with. Another reason that many international students prefer homestay is because of their desire to establish a closer relationship with the local society and this social support has been shown to improve international student adjustment (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). A female Japanese student’s response is representative of many other international students’ thoughts. “Firstly, I lived in a homestay, because I really wanted to know what Australian culture is; it is much easier for me to understand Australian culture when I resorted to homestay”.

The relationship with homestay families was emphasised in Ward and Masgorcet’s (2004) study, where a correlation between students’ satisfaction and their relationships with the landlords and other tenants was found. Within this study, participants indicated that most of them had harmonious relationships with their landlords and housemates. Within this study it was found that those who enjoyed a good relationship tended to indicate fewer negative emotional issues such as depression and loneliness.

However, the expense of homestay remained the main barrier to international students’ choosing it as their primary accommodation. A Korean participant gave an explanation:

Actually I want to live with Australians, but I have to pay more if I live in homestay. I cannot afford it. Most Asian students want to practice English with a local. They want to have more opportunities to be with locals. But we don’t have many chances to interact with them. (Korean female student)

Some students choose a university hostel, especially an on-campus hostel for security reasons (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008). Also, living in a university hostel provides good opportunities for international students to meet local students. A Japanese student responded that, “when I moved to an accommodation on campus, which is also good, I met a lot of Australian students and we became friends”. However, again, the financial consideration reduces the numbers of hostel students. As a female Korean participant said “I am living in a hostel. It is quite good. But I found the price is a little bit higher. My friend is living in a shared house which is much cheaper than a hostel”.

Although homestay and hostel accommodation each have their own advantages, the higher prices mean that they are chosen by fewer international students. The study showed that the economic factor of affordability, impacts international students’ selection of accommodation. This finding is supported by Khawaja and Dempsey’s (2007) study which identifies that unaffordable rentals place greater financial and psychological pressure on international students. Moreover those participants who were more satisfied with their accommodation were also more pleased overall with their circumstances, which is supported by Rosenthal et al. (2006) who stated students’ satisfaction with accommodation is associated with levels of both depression and anxiety.

Accommodation location

Location is another important factor for the international student to consider. Most participants preferred accommodation which is close to the university campus, for three reasons: cost of travelling, time and security, with security being their first consideration. Within the study, students who lived at greater distances from campus had concerns that this may place them at a higher risk of crime and other potential dangers, especially if walking at night. Living close to the campus was felt to also save time and money and renders easy access to campus facilities, such as libraries, amenities, transport, security, and community. Amongst the participants interviewed, all these factors impacted upon the students’ evaluation of their accommodation. In addition to the above factors, the community environment surrounding the accommodation emerged as another factor, as discussed by an academic participant:

I feel sorry for international students coming here moving into a house near the university, which is in a low socio-economic area. I think most of the people you found in the area are not really
representative of Australians. Many of them are rough, probably not well-educated. In contrast to international students, most of whom are from good educated background, good home environment etc. (Academic staff 3)

Relationship with housemates and/or landlords

The relationship with housemates and/or landlords was closely related to their satisfaction with their accommodation. As an interviewed staff member said, “Some students probably suffer severe stress because of whom they are living with or probably they have problems with their landlord. That can affect their health and wellbeing”. (Administrative staff 1)

It was noted from the data that most of the participants had positive relationships with their housemates and landlords which contributes to their satisfaction with their accommodation. As a male Pakistan participant said, “My landlord is a very nice person. He can solve any problem which we are facing. I am very satisfied with my accommodation”.

Transport system

Transportation influences international students’ quality of life when in an unfamiliar environment. Service, safety and price were three aspects affecting participants’ views of transportation. These aspects also determined international students’ level of satisfaction with public transport. Although international students were moderately satisfied with public transport services in regional Australia, some problems were of concern.

Service

Quality of service in public transport is very important to international students. Three main problems raised in the interviews were inadequate numbers of bus stops, few transport choices and low frequency of buses arriving. As a male Chinese student said, “There are few bus stops in Launceston, especially in some rural areas. Sometimes it is hard to find a bus stop”. Some participants mentioned the lack of transport choice in regional Australia, for example a female Japanese student commented, “There is no train, not enough taxis”, while a male Chinese student held a similar attitude, “There is no underground as well”. The low frequency of buses was mentioned a number of times, with most participants complaining that the intervals between buses are too long.

Security

Security, including safety on buses or at bus stop zones, particularly for international students who need to take buses late at night or in the early morning is another important factor relating to the quality of transport services. A male Indian student participant expressed his worries about the safety issue, “And also I cannot study after 5 o’clock, and also I don’t think it is safe waiting in the bus stop at night”. Such a factor influences the psychological wellbeing of these international students in an unfamiliar environment.

Price

According to data collected, most participants were basically satisfied with the price of public transport except for the taxi services, which were considered unaffordable. A male student from Pakistan responded: “[Transport] is good...the bus is very cheap... If you take a taxi, it is very expensive, so I try to avoid using taxis and to choose other types of transport”.

Financial concern and employment opportunities

Financial concerns are usually considered to be one of the greatest sources of stress for international students (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000; Mullins et al., 1995). Although financial preparation was made before departure, most students still have financial concerns owing to the increase in tuition fees, lack of scholarships, and the increasing cost of living in regional Australia. Sometimes unexpected
events such as an examination failure, visa extension, sickness, accidents and so on, can directly cause financial strain. If a student is unwilling to overburden their family, such events can easily provoke or increase personal anxiety.

*I think the biggest challenge is financial problem. I don’t give burden to my family to support my tuition. I am trying to solve it and having money. I am trying to pay my entire course fee and support myself; it is the biggest challenge for me.* (Female Chinese student)

**Growth of tuition fees and lack of scholarships**

One of the principle reasons causing international students’ financial concerns is increasing tuition fees (Chen, 1999). Tuition fees from international students have become an important financial source for most universities in Australia. International students are required to pay much higher fees than Australian domestic students. Apart from the higher tuition fees, international students have fewer opportunities to receive loans, scholarships or other financial support compared to Australian students. This finding is supported by Lin and Yi’s (1997) study which notes that scholarship options offered by the university to international students are far less than those for local students.

**Increase in living costs**

Although the cost of living in regional Australia may be cheaper when compared to larger cities in Australia, it has rapidly increased over the period 2008 to 2011. According to the Department of Immigration and Border Protection (2014), international students, in 2014, needed to prepare a living cost of AUD$18,610 per year for accommodation, transport, books, food, electricity and entertainment, which has dramatically increased over the past decade (Lane, 2013). The growth in tuition fees and living expenses has brought international students under greater psychological pressure and increased their anxiety and negative emotions (Obeng-Odoom, 2012).

**Unexpected events**

When encountering some particular circumstances, such as examination failure, visa extension, physical illness, psychological problems or an accident, most international students become anxious due to the need to spend money unexpectedly and perhaps beyond their budget. Levels of anxiety increase due to the lack of perceived control over these particular events (Rapee, Craske, Brown, & Barlow, 1996). Furthermore, some student participants indicated they were not willing to share with their families personal problems, such as financial difficulties.

**Employment opportunities**

Some students opt to look for part-time employment in order to reduce financial pressures. However, five out of the twenty complained that it was not easy to find part-time employment in regional Australia, with fewer work opportunities in regional Australia compared with more metropolitan areas of Australia. If fortunate enough to find employment, effectively balancing study with work was identified as a problem. Therefore, dealing with employment-related issues, such as poor working conditions and balancing education commitments has a propensity to impact on international student wellbeing (Nyland et al., 2009). In the words of one student:

*The first thing is financial thing. Some students just come here and realize that they can afford yourself (themselves). You have to find a part-time job. But I think you need time to work, also you need time to study. So you must delete some time in relax and sleeping, that maybe affect your health.*

*If you don’t have strong financial support, think twice before you come here.* (Female Chinese student)

**Food and diet**

Food is one of the most basic elements in maintaining a person’s physical and psychological health (Bidlack, 1996; Capra, 2007). When relocating to a foreign country, being unaccustomed to the local food would be a challenge encountered by international students. They may at times change
their original dietary habits consciously or unconsciously due to the unavailability of cultural specific food or ingredients, the different concepts regarding nutrition, or the different ways food is processed in the new country. In this study, adaptation to new food was identified as one of the main factors affecting the participants’ transition to the new environment. The enjoyment of ‘Australian’ foods may help international students to adapt more easily to local society and culture, however unavailability of cultural food and lack of traditional family support, are two issues which emerged in the interviews.

Unavailability of cultural specific food

Unavailability of cultural food was mentioned by some interviewees, especially those who are from Arabic or predominantly Muslim countries. Due to the nature of regional Australia there is less diversity of foods compared with other big cities in Australia. It is relatively difficult for those students to source food that is culturally and religiously appropriate. High prices and low quality of culturally specific foods that could be found emerged as another difficulty and is consistent with Pan, Dixon, Himburg, and Huffman (1999) who demonstrated that unavailability of cultural specific food is one of salient problems encountered by Asian students in the United States.

Lack of traditional family support

Lack of traditional family support emerged from the interviews as another issue. As most international students were living independently in the host country they lacked traditional family support for their dietary needs, instead having to look after their diet themselves. This lack of traditional family support impacted negatively on the dietary habits of some of the international students (Ramakrishna & Weiss, 1992). For example, approximately 11% of participants rarely or never eat fruit, 7% participants rarely or never eat vegetables and 36% participants very often skip breakfast.

Thirteen of the twenty student participants responded that they usually cook at home and seldom go out for dinner. Finance and health were two primary considerations. Cooking at home was viewed as much cheaper than having dinner in a restaurant, while home-cooked meals were considered to be much healthier than other meals, especially “fast food”. In this case, 80% of participants reported a low frequency of eating fast food and 10% of participants had never eaten fast food.

Conclusion

As international students migrate, live and study in new environments they experience a complex transition process. This process can lead to poor physical and psychological health which is impacted by four major adjustment challenges; general living adjustment, academic adjustment, social-cultural adjustment and personal psychological adjustment. The focus of this paper is to provide insight into a number of the general living challenges international students experience as they attempt to adjust and transition to their new environment.

This study, conducted in a regional area in Australia, has demonstrated that accommodation, transport, finances, food and diet are key considerations which impact upon the satisfaction of international students. The study demonstrates that there are potential opportunities for student bodies, host institutions and governments to provide more proactive support to assist and support the transition of international students as they study within Australia. This may be through the provision of a greater depth of information in relation to basic living, such as alternatives methods of transport; how best to accommodate financial difficulties; employment opportunities; and accessing cultural foods and goods. Also, the educational institution needs to give consideration to security and best options for accommodation to ensure students live in a secure and low-cost environment.
As part of this process, international students are also required to acculturate to their new cultural environment. Nevertheless, within this study, each international student reported that they were satisfied with their life in regional Australia; they had tenacious survival abilities; showed a strong willingness to succeed; and displayed a positive attitude as they transitioned into regional Australian lifestyle and education.

References


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The authors may be contacted:
Dr Yun Yue
yyue@gse.pku.edu.cn
Daniel Terry
Daniel.Terry@utas.edu.au
Appendix 1

Interview Questions for Students

1. How would you describe your health status?
2. Have you experienced any physical illness after coming to Australia? Please give details.
3. Have you experienced any psychological problems, such as depression or anxiety after coming to Australia? Please give details.
4. How do you feel about living in [this state]?
5. If you are asked to give advice to your friends in your home country about living and studying in [this state], what advice would you give them?
6. What are some of the biggest challenges to your life in [this state]?
7. How do you feel about the ways by which you deal with these challenges?
8. With the benefit of hindsight, would you do things differently?
9. What are your sources of support in your study and daily life? What do they mean to you personally?
10. Is there any interesting experience about your life here that you would like to share?
11. Is there any other thing you would like to share in this interview?

Appendix 2

Interview Questions for Staff Members

1. Could you say something about international students in [this state], especially students in [this] University? Based on your understanding, what factors would affect international students’ health and wellbeing?
2. What kind of general living problems would be facing by the international students in [this state]?
3. What kind of academic difficulties would they encounter?
4. Do you think they would encounter any social-cultural difficulties during the process of cultural transition? Could you please give me some details?
5. International student is the group of people who are susceptible to various psychological problems, such as depression, anxiety, loneliness and homesickness. Could you say something about this?
6. Are there many international students seeking support from you? What kind of problems do they normally seek support? And normally how do you provide support to them? Do you think these supports are helpful?
7. Do you have any suggestions to current or future international students who are studying or will be studying in [this university]?
8. Do you have any suggestions to the university or government in terms of support of international students?
Author/s:
TERRY, DR; Yue, Y; Lê, Q

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