

A JUXTAPOSE EXAMINATION OF EXPERIENCES AMONG TRANSFER STUDENTS IN UNITED STATES AND CURRENT STUDENTS IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract: *An American Degree Transfer Program (ADP) represents one of the options for Malaysian students who wish to obtain a degree from Universities in the United States (US). However, ADP students who eventually transfer often lack on-the-ground information about the study experience in US. This could lead to mismatched expectations on learning experiences that might affect academic performance. This paper explores experiences that might potentially impact the adjustment of transfer students in US and compares similar experiences with students currently enrolled in ADP. Both groups of participants answered a self-administered survey questionnaire that enquires their perceptions on a variety of factors that could contribute to positive learning experiences. The findings revealed that class environment, academic rigor, assessment model, interactions with faculties and socio-cultural issues were some of the dimensions reported by students that impact experiences in both US and Malaysian universities. Except for assessment model, there were differences in experiences between US campuses and ADP in the other dimensions. Academic trouble, defined as transfer shock, was evident only among the Engineering students due to the difficulty level of courses in this discipline. The results from this study provide an insight for potential students planning to transfer to US to realign their expectations with reality.*

Keywords: *Transfer Student, Learning Experiences, US Universities, Transfer Shock*

Introduction

Students pursuing post-secondary education in the United States (US) and Canada are very likely to transfer from one institution to another during a program of study. It has been reported that about one-third of students change institution at least once before completing their degree and, among these, almost half change institutions more than once for various reasons (Shapiro *et al*, 2015; Hossler *et al*, 2012). The two most common types of change are vertical and lateral transfers. Vertical transfers to four-year institutions or universities are a necessary continuation after finishing two-years of study at community colleges in order to earn a bachelor degree.

Lateral mobility among universities could be due to multiple reasons including poor academic performance, academic, personal or social dissatisfaction, financial difficulty, or pursuit of programs unavailable at the first institution (McCormick et al, 2009).

Many students who transfer from two-year colleges to four-year institutions in US, also known as universities, often report numerous challenges in adjusting to the rigorous academic standards in the new environment. The term “transfer shock” was first used by Hill (1965) to characterize such academic difficulties in the first one or two semesters upon transfer. Transfer shock is typically represented by an initial drop in grade point average (GPA) after transferring from college to university. This is normally followed by a recovery in subsequent semesters. Both Ceija (1997) and Hill (1965) further reported that a transfer student will probably have the most trouble in “quantitative” subjects, such as engineering and physical sciences. This phenomenon shares the same notion as culture shock (Bennett, 1997) which can be illustrated by a U-shaped model representing a starting optimism of studying abroad, goes through a transition slump (in grades for transfer students) and then returns to a high point (Zapf, 1991). However, some researchers argued that the U-shaped model is too simplistic to correctly represent the complex nature of transfer shock. For instance, the subsequent improvement in grades might not happen because grades can be impacted by a variety of other factors. Conversely, others might not encounter any slump in grades, but instead experience a “transfer ecstasy” when their GPA actually increased after transferring (Laanan, 2001). Nonetheless, it is recognized that some form of academic distress related to transfers does exist, albeit with variable severity (Thurmond, 2007).

Purpose of This Study

In this private Malaysian university, ADP prepares students for vertical transfer to 4-year institutions in US. Students who have completed two years at ADP transfer around 60 course credits to US universities of their choice. This program has been operating for nearly twenty years and almost all our students have successfully transferred and graduated from various universities in US, and more recently from Canadian universities too. Despite these years of operation, there are few formal records of our students’ experiences in the US campuses. Also lacking are studies that compare student experiences in two-year colleges outside North America with those who have transferred to four-year institutions there. Accordingly, this study is initiated to address this shortfall of information. It represents a preliminary investigation that will lead to a more in-depth study later. The importance of understanding the factors and processes that contribute to the experiences of the transfer students has important implications to the ADP program by offering useful feedbacks on the effectiveness in preparing students for transfer.

This investigation involves ADP students who have transferred to US universities and current sophomore students in ADP. Tinto’s (1993) academic and social integration model is modified to include emerging insights from other studies that are concerned with transfer experiences. However the scope here is focussed on the academic rather than social issues. The purpose is twofold. First, the study explores the ways in which perceptions on US university experiences are similar and the ways in which they are different from those in ADP. Secondly, we attempt to uncover if the transfer shock phenomenon is evident among the transfer students according to course disciplines. Therefore the following research questions will be addressed:

- i) What variables contribute towards positive academic experiences for transfer students in US universities and students in ADP?

- ii) How do academic experiences of transfer students in US compare with those of the existing sophomore students in ADP?
- iii) Is there evidence of transfer shock among the students according to academic majors?

Literature Review

Established research works in the United States have identified a range of student and institutional issues that impact students' experiences in campus. In particular, Tinto (1993) academic and social integration model have attributed attrition to academic incongruence between the student's competence, efforts and needs with the institutional demands. Likewise, someone who fails to integrate socially with the college communities comprising of his peers, faculty and other staffs will be marginalized and become disengaged. Barriers to student retention are regularly correlated with poor academic preparation, lack of clear goals, low faculty involvement with students, indifferent social engagements with fellow students, and racist campus cultures. While Tinto's model is more commonly used to explain the first year experience of freshmen in university, some studies have also applied it to the transfer shock experience of community college students. The latter studies, however, noted that variables of academic and social integration are different from those of first year experiences, but are unique to transfer students only (Townsend & Wilson, 2009; Davies & Kratky, 2000). This is because most transfer students have already learned to navigate and become comfortable with the undergraduate experience, but a new and different environment with different policies, academic expectations and size of the institution can result in frequent judgements and comparisons with prior experiences and environments (Laanan, 2001), giving rise to mismatches of expectations with actual experiences (Bennett, 1997).

Insights emerging from studies that adapted Tinto's model to explain transfer shock draw attention to academic mismatches arising from differences in the level of course difficulty, the class structure, classroom environment, assessment model, and degree of interactions with faculty and staff. There is a general expectation that faculty's attitude towards students in large universities tends to be more impersonal and uncaring as opposed to the more student centered and nurturing environment in community colleges (Gerhardt & Ackerman, 2014; Gawley & McGowan, 2006). Also, academic rigor has definitely increased with a shift of academic responsibility to the student, and a greater amount of independent work in the university (Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Transfer students further reported of struggles to make new friends, getting involved with clubs and getting to know about available services (Davies & Kratky, 1999; Laanan, 2007; Townsend & Wilson, 2006). Social integration might be even more difficult for those who transfer from foreign colleges, as they would have to deal with culture shock on top of all the other challenges. Even when the transfer is within the same country Laanan (2007) considers the new university as a foreign environment, thus the transition adjustment is similar to the experiences of cross-cultural relocation of sojourners in many ways. All these difficulties largely influence a student's perception of their new academic environment which in turn potentially influence their subsequent academic performance resulting in transfer shock.

Context

The university in this study is a long standing private higher education institution in Malaysia renowned for its quality education and high academic standards. There are a variety of programs of which the American Degree Transfer Program (ADP) is one of them. ADP is a small program with a total population of approximately 600 students. In some ways it is similar to community colleges in the United States (US), yet there are some salient differences. Similar

to community colleges, ADP offers lower division courses pertaining to general education requirements for transfer to bachelors' degree programs at 4-year institutions in US, and to a lesser extent in Canada. The course outlines, conduct of lessons, grading system and the academic semesters closely emulate those in the US. The difference lies in the student profiles. Community colleges in US are reported to be the most diverse institutions in American higher education, notably with regards to types of students (American Association of Community Colleges, 2016). They are more likely to enrol a larger proportion of non-traditional older age students (> 24 years) and from minority and under-privileged communities. These students are also more likely to have variable academic abilities and educational goals, familial obligations, and are likely to have a job (Cohen *et al*, 2014; Strahn-Koller, 2012). In contrast, ADP comprises of traditional age students (18-20 years) from upper middle income families, most of whom are graduates themselves. They are well provided for by their parents who can afford an expensive private college and US education, so our students rarely need a part-time job. Their sole desire is to pursue a bachelor degree in a North American university. The ethnicity is predominantly Malaysian, while less than 25% are from other Asian countries and the Indian continent. Students in ADP have good academic standing and they consistently exceed the minimum entry requirements set by this University, especially in Mathematics, Science and English. Typical of Asian parents who are ever anxious about their children' educational success and well-being, enrolment in ADP is a choice that parents made immediately after their children finish secondary school so as to keep them close to home for a few more years to enhance their academic preparedness before going abroad.

Although there are formal articulation arrangements with some universities in US, our students can also apply to others of their choice. This program takes pride in matching the course outlines as closely as possible with those offered in US to minimize transfer credit loss. Most of the course credits are accepted for transfer, except for isolated cases especially English, in some universities. Courses in ADP are taught by full-time faculty members with post graduate qualifications, of which several are alumni of US universities.

Methodology

Participants

The pool of participants in this study consisted of 69 full-time students aged between 18 and 21 years old, who were alumni and current students of ADP in Malaysia. The alumni (n=35) were those who have completed two semesters of academic studies in their respective universities in US and have returned to ADP for summer courses in 2018, while others were still in America. The current students (n=34) were sophomores in their third, fourth to fifth semesters in ADP who have been in the program long enough to provide a more accurate feedback on their college experience.

Data Collection

This study adopted a quantitative research design. The instrument used was a self-administered survey questionnaire with 58 questions that were formulated by us for this research. The questionnaire relied on Tinto's model and several insights that emerged from a few studies specifically, those from Gerhardt & Ackerman (2014), Laanan (2007) and Gawley & McGowan (2006), who found that mismatches in expectations and experiences commonly arose in key areas such as class experiences, workload distinctions, assessment models, and interactions with faculties. The items in this questionnaire were accordingly grouped into these categories with the inclusion of one section on socio-cultural issues for the transfer students only. Another category, reason for attending university, was extracted from Laanan's (2004)

transfer student questionnaire to compare reasons for university choice. Students' perceptions were scored on a 5-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree). The first page of the questionnaire stated that participation is voluntary besides inquiring about the name of the US universities they transferred / intend to transfer to, their CGPA before transfer, their first and second semester GPAs in US, and number of credits transferred. One open-ended question was included in the first page asking students to write suggestions on how ADP can better improve the transfer process.

Data collection was done over several days for those alumni who have returned for summer courses at ADP. The questionnaire was emailed to those alumni who are in the US. A similar questionnaire, without the socio-cultural dimension, was distributed to the current ADP students, because acculturation challenges are not apparent for local students staying at home.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using the SPSS package. Answers with mean Likert scores exceeding 3.00 for the transfer students were selected to determine the variables perceived to be important to their learning experiences in US. These variables were evaluated and grouped according to the defining key areas. To answer the second research question, mean difference for each variable was calculated by subtracting mean Likert scores from ADP students from the mean Likert scores from transfer students for each item. Independent samples T-test was done on the mean differences to determine whether there were significant differences between students' experience in US and those in ADP.

To examine for the presence of transfer shock in US universities in the third research question, the CGPA before transfer was compared to the first and second semester GPAs from the US universities according to academic disciplines. Next we compared the overall mean CGPA values, as an indication of academic rigor across all the disciplines, to search for the disciplines that are reported to be most difficult.

Results

All the transfer students who participated in this survey are currently enrolled in 16 different public universities. These include the University of Minnesota Twin Cities (21%), Purdue University (15%), University of Lincoln, Nebraska (15%), Iowa State University (6%), Ohio State University (6%), University of Western Michigan (6%), University of Wisconsin Madison (6%) and others (3%). Some of these universities are within the 100th and 150th US universities ranking.

Class sizes in these universities (Table 1) are mainly large and medium comprising more than 50 students, thus lessons are conducted in lecture theatres. Large classes however have smaller discussion classes conducted by teaching assistants (TA) who are post graduate students. In comparison, ADP class sizes are all small with 30 or less students per class and conducted in the classrooms, with no discussion classes

Table 1: Distribution of Class Size and Type of Universities Attended by Transfer Students in US

Class Size	No of classes (%)	Type of Universities
Big (> 100 students)	9 (26%)	Public
Medium (50-99 students)	14 (40%)	Public
Small (< 50)	8 (23%)	Public
Mixed	4 (11%)	Public

Table 2 shows the range of reasons for the choice of universities in US. The top two reasons for both groups of students are the relevant academic major and the university's academic ranking. However, there are mismatches in the other reasons. While transfer students next three top choices are the affordability, ability to transfer all ADP course credits and encouragement by friends /siblings at the same university respectively, the existing ADP students expect to enrol in large urban universities with highly selective entry requirements. It is quite surprising that current ADP students are not too bothered about the transferability of their course credits. Predictably, the offer of financial aid is a low ranked choice in both groups since this is forthcoming from their parents. Also, visiting representatives from specific US universities have little influence on the students' choice.

Table 2: Reasons for Choice of Specific US universities

Reasons for Your University Choice	Transfer Students		ADP Students	
	Rank	* % Response	Rank	* % Response
Offer the academic major of my interest	1	100.0	1	87.6
Good academic ranking of this institution	2	81.8	2	81.8
Cost at this institution is affordable for me	3	75.8	4	51.7
All my credits are transferrable	4	57.6	8	20.6
Encouraged by friends / siblings who are in US	5	51.5	6	34.4
Competitive University with high entry CGPA	6	38.7	4	51.6
Urban / city campus	7	33.4	3	53.3
Sub-urban campus	8	32.3	7	32.1
The large size	9	32.3	5	41.3
I was offered financial assistance	10	29.1	10	10.3
Offer of Campus accommodation	11	26.7	9	17.2
Influence by a visiting representative from this University	12	21.9	9	17.2

*Percentages are derived from Likert scores of ≥ 4.0 for each reason. Students are allowed to select more than one reason.

The variables that are reported to impact the experiences of transfer students are listed in Table 3. These are grouped into key categories as classroom experiences, academic rigor, interactions with faculties and socio-cultural issues. Classroom experiences in US are determined by independent t-test statistics to be significantly different ($p < 0.05$) in that students prefer to ask questions during the smaller discussion classes, but they tend to be silent during the lectures. ADP class size is generally smaller (< 30 students), and this facilitates more participation during the lecture period. There is also significantly more ($p < 0.05$) learning support workshops to assist student in their learning in US compared to ADP. These services include writing and quantitative labs, and computer assistance.

Academic rigor has significantly increased in US universities where courses are reported to be more difficult and the workload more challenging. Much effort must be made to read extensively in order to turn in assignments that require critical analysis. All these demands have stressed them out in their first two semesters in US. In contrast ADP students reported an easier and more relaxing workload.

Assessment model is similar in US and ADP with both groups reporting similar mixed assessment in the form of writing and multiple choice questions, and similar test difficulties and degree of strictness in grading. Interactions with faculties in US are reported to be significantly more ($p < 0.05$) impersonal with communications mainly through emails, instead of the practice in ADP where students can meet faculties anytime in their office even without prior appointments.

Table 3: Variables that Impact Experiences of Transfer Students in US and a Comparison with Similar Experiences by ADP Students

Variables	Mean Likert score \pm SD (transfer students)	Mean difference \pm Std Error	t-statistics	p-value	
<i>I. CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT</i>					
Q5	I ask questions during the lectures	3.03 \pm 1.04	-0.38 \pm 0.23	-1.67	0.05
Q6	I ask questions during the discussion classes only	3.77 \pm 1.03	0.98 \pm 0.25	3.98	0.00*
Q38	Writing workshops and other services are available to support my learning.	3.37 \pm 1.21	1.27 \pm 0.23	5.59	0.00*
<i>II. ACADEMIC RIGOR</i>					
Q16	Assignments are individual writing requiring extensive reading & analysis of ideas	4.46 \pm 0.89	0.58 \pm 0.20	2.98	0.00*
Q32	My courses are difficult that need a lot of efforts for studying	4.49 \pm 0.82	0.73 \pm 0.19	3.81	0.00*
Q33	The workload is demanding	3.43 \pm 1.17	0.64 \pm 0.20	3.25	0.00*
Q56	I often feel stressed out with work	4.23 \pm 0.73	0.74 \pm 0.30	2.45	0.00*
<i>III. ASSESSMENT MODEL</i>					
Q13	Tests and exams are chiefly/mainly MCQs	2.94 \pm 1.28	-0.15 \pm 0.29	-0.50	0.31
Q14	Tests and exams need critical thinking	3.77 \pm 0.94	0.18 \pm 0.21	0.86	0.20
Q27	My instructors are stricter / more critical in their grading of my work/tests/exams	3.74 \pm 1.07	0.08 \pm 0.23	0.33	0.37
<i>IV. INTERACTIONS WITH FACULTIES</i>					
Q42	I only communicated with my lecturers through emails	3.14 \pm 1.24	0.69 \pm 0.29	2.37	0.01*
Q43	My lecturer do not know me individually - I am just one of the crowd	3.26 \pm 1.27	0.77 \pm 0.28	2.71	0.00*
Q45	I regularly see my advisers for enrollment advice & career advising	3.74 \pm 1.15	0.47 \pm 0.27	1.73	0.04*
<i>V. SOCIO- CULTURAL ISSUES (Transfer students only)</i>					
Q46	I socialize with my American classmates after class	2.86 \pm 1.12	Not Applicable	-	-

Q47	I socialize with other Asian classmates after class	3.57 ± 1.01	”	-	-
Q48	I mainly socialize with other Malaysians after class	3.17 ± 1.44	”	-	-
Q51	I regularly attended parties, dance, & student organized activities	3.57 ± 1.12	”	-	-
Q52	I am actively involved in at least one ECA	3.14 ± 1.26	”	-	-
Q55	I often feel home-sick	2.71 ± 1.15	”	-	-
Q28	The learning experiences at ADP prepare me well for the transfer	3.34 ± 0.97	”	-	-

*Significant at p=0.05

In terms of socio-cultural issues the transfer students essentially have quite an active social life in US, so they seldom homesick. They prefer to socialize mainly with Malaysians and other Asians, and much less with their American classmates. They are also involved in at least one extracurricular activity (ECA) in the previous two semesters. An illuminating feedback is that ADP had prepared them well academically for transfer to US universities.

Transfer students' GPA records show that most disciplines experience a transfer ecstasy. This is evidenced by the improvement in GPA after transfer as presented in Table 4. The only discipline that demonstrated the presence of a slight transfer shock is in the engineering discipline with a decline of about 0.3 in GPA. Course difficulties are reported to be high for all disciplines, but engineering students encounter the most difficult courses, followed by those in Liberal arts and computer science (Table 5). However these findings must be interpreted with caution given the small size of the subsamples

Table 4: Popular Majors of Transfer Students and Their Academic Achievements in US

Academic discipline	n	CGPA before transfer	1 st semester GPA	2 nd semester GPA
Engineering	12	3.58	3.28	3.11
Liberal Arts	8	3.45	3.83	3.69
Business	5	3.30	3.53	3.72
Computer Science	2	3.18	3.21	3.10
Applied Science	2	3.44	3.61	Not available
Actuarial Science	2	3.55	3.62	3.64
Others	3	3.17	3.52	3.58

Table 5: Academic Rigor Reported by Transfer Students in US According to Academic Disciplines

Academic disciplines	Overall Mean Likert score ± SD*
Engineering	4.60 ± 0.25
Liberal Arts	4.06 ± 0.55
Business	3.75 ± 0.53
Computer Science	4.00 ± 0.90
Applied Science	3.75 ± 1.06

*these scores are the mean of all the questions that clustered under academic rigor in Table 3

The top ten suggestions from transfer students in which the ADP could ease some of the transfer woes encountered are listed in Table 6. The general consensus is for ADP to introduce more discipline specific courses that are transferrable so that students can get straight into third year. Secondly, more information regarding the transfer experience in US would be welcomed through dialogues with returning students who can share first-hand information with potential transfer students. The message also comes across quite clearly that ADP should increase the academic rigor as a way to improve the preparedness of transfer students for the more difficult courses in the higher divisions. This is somewhat ironic compared to their regular complaints while at ADP that is suggestive of the lecturers' high expectations for assignments / tests/ exams. Finally, students must be prepared in all respects to extend their study beyond two years in the US, and to make efforts for acculturation.

Table 6: Some Suggestions by Students for ADP Support of the Transfer Process

1. Take courses relevant to intended academic major, especially the pre-requisites
2. ADP should offer more variety of transferrable courses
3. Invite alumni of universities to share experiences
4. Have returning students to share experiences about academic standards, campus culture and what happens after ADP
5. ADP should train students to think more critically
6. Stop spoon-feeding in ADP
7. Advise students to choose university not based on ranking and price tag but rather on quality of program & location
8. Be emotionally & financially prepared to study more than 2 years in US due to loss of course credits and other reasons
9. Get involved in ECA to meet new people in US
10. Be prepared for some form of homesickness and cultural differences in the States

Discussion

This study has brought out several mismatches between actual experiences and expectations of students in US and in Malaysia. These expectations may well be modified by actual experiences. In particular, most of the students have transferred to public universities with more affordable fees and the award of transfer credits. They could have had idealistic notions before similar to the current students about entering highly selective universities regardless of the implications of credit transfers, but the reality depends on the acceptance offer from that university. The message from this insight is for the ADP students to apply to several universities, even to those which are less selective, to improve their chances of successful acceptance. The ADP students should be forewarned that academic competition is stiff in highly selective universities and they could expect to experience some degree of transfer shock (Laanan, 2007).

The transfer students in this study come from many different universities, each with its unique characteristics giving rise to highly variable experiences. Despite these differences some important commonalities have emerged about the transfer process. The current ADP students could expect a more difficult and rigorous academic experience in US, since they will be taking courses in the higher divisions. The most difficult courses are to be expected in the quantitative courses. This observation is also confirmed by Ceija (1997) and Hill (1965). Therefore students

have to take charge of their own learning and expect a lot less spoon feeding from lecturers. More intensive reading is expected in order to produce in-depth writing assignments. Assessment models are not significantly different, but the conduct of final examination is less formal than at ADP. There are also more university-sponsored academic workshops in US universities in which students should take proactive steps to participate to address their learning deficiencies. Although lecturers may be perceived to be more impersonal, especially in large classes, students must be willing to approach the professors as Gerhardt & Ackerman (2014) noted that transfer students who did so actually found the faculties to be caring. However, the social experience is generally positive for most. Their reports on the university community involvement have enhanced the totality of their university experience, thus culture shock variable such as feelings of homesickness was not apparent.

Although almost all ADP course credits are transferrable, the award of college transfer credits can be perplexing and ambiguous. For instance, some transfer students from ADP have voiced their discontent about being placed into the sophomore level instead of the third year because they have not fulfilled some pre-requisite courses specific to their major, particularly in engineering. Even with transfers within US, Gawley and McGowan (2004) found that there were cases where a third year university student, had to also take first-year courses, thus confusing him as to whether he belonged to the third or first year. Another thorny aspect often expressed relates to the loss of credits from Malaysian general studies (MPU modules) and English composition (ENGL101) in some universities. Perhaps future articulations could work towards the transferability of such courses. It would also help if ADP is able to offer more variety of major specific courses to expedite academic progress in US.

The limitations of this study are the small sample size for both groups of respondents and also the diversity of the universities that they transferred to. These universities can differ in size, selectivity, location and campus culture. The results therefore must be interpreted with caution since the sample is not confidently regarded as being representative of the transfer student population. Furthermore this study is cross-sectional and retrospective allowing students to reflect on their past and current experiences. The next phase should definitely consider longitudinal aspects of the transfer experience so that changes over time can be determined. Nevertheless, the findings can provide some guidance to current students about what to expect when they transfer to US universities.

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