# Analyzing In-Depth Study of Southeast Asian Graduate Students: A Qualitative Approach

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Studying abroad can be a transformative experience, but it often presents significant challenges. Southeast Asian international graduate students, in particular, face considerable academic and cultural hurdles when transitioning to U.S. higher education. These stressors, including language barriers, financial difficulties, and academic adjustments, can negatively impact their mental health and academic performance. This study aims to illuminate these challenges and identify effective support strategies.

It is essential to recognize the diverse experiences of Southeast Asian American (SEAA) students, who are included in this study. The SEAA community is rich in culture and heritage, contributing significantly to the U.S. landscape. This research seeks to understand the unique challenges faced by SEAAs and to foster a more inclusive academic environment.

This study has identified key academic and cultural stressors by examining the experiences of Southeast Asian international graduate students. These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted support services to enhance student well-being and academic success. It is crucial to shift from a deficit-oriented perspective to one that centers on the voices and experiences of SEAA students. By listening to their stories, higher education institutions can develop effective strategies to support their academic journeys and create a more inclusive campus community.

**KEYWORDS:**

Southeast Asian American (SEAA), Higher Education, International Students, Academic systems.

## INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad offers transformative experiences, but Southeast Asian graduate students often encounter significant challenges during their academic journeys (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2012). This study focuses on these students' academic and cultural stressors, including language barriers, cultural differences, financial concerns, and academic pressures (Fritz et al., 2008). Despite these obstacles, Southeast Asian students exhibit remarkable resilience. However, the combined impact of these stressors can contribute to mental health challenges such as anxiety and depression, potentially affecting academic performance (Hamamura & Laird, 2014; Hawkes, 2014).

This study focuses on Southeast Asian American (SEAA) graduate students residing in the U.S., encompassing individuals with diverse backgrounds from countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and the Philippines. Acknowledging this diversity to promote inclusivity and equity within the research is essential. This research is essential for understanding the academic and cultural challenges faced by Southeast Asian American (SEAA) graduate students as they navigate U.S. higher education. By examining existing research and analyzing SEAA experiences, this study aims to develop targeted support strategies that enhance student well-being and academic success. These findings are critical for anyone seeking to improve the experiences of this population.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The transition to graduate studies in the U.S. can be both exciting and overwhelming for Southeast Asian students, often leading to significant challenges in academic and cultural adjustment (Das, 2022). Understanding these challenges is crucial to supporting student success and well-being. This research explores the experiences of Southeast

Asian graduate students, who frequently encounter academic and cultural barriers that negatively impact their mental and physical health. The Qualitative study aims to develop effective support strategies and create a more inclusive campus environment by identifying these specific challenges (Ying, 2002). By understanding the specific academic and cultural challenges faced by Southeast Asian international students, this study aims to inform the development of effective support systems and interventions. Ultimately, this research promotes empathy and inclusivity within higher education by highlighting the experiences of this student population (Yoon et al., 2008).

## PURPOSE STATEMENT

This qualitative study examines the academic and cultural challenges faced by Southeast Asian international graduate students as they adapt to U.S. higher education. By centering the voices of these students, the research explores their experiences navigating different teaching styles, social norms, grading standards, and academic expectations. These adjustments can be particularly challenging, requiring students to develop new academic skills and strategies while adapting to a new social environment (Creswell, 2018).

## LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Relocating to a new country for graduate studies presents significant challenges for Southeast Asian students (Karuppan & Barari, 2010). Adapting to unfamiliar academic systems, language barriers, and cultural differences can significantly impact their well-being and academic performance (Fritz et al., 2008; Nguyen & Martínez, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2013; Brown & Aktas, 2011; Marthoenis, 2018; Rienties et al., 2011). Academic stressors such as heavy workloads, unfamiliar assessment methods, and limited access to academic support can exacerbate these difficulties (Lee et al., 2004). The cumulative effect of these challenges can lead to high levels of stress, anxiety, and even depression, impacting students' motivation and academic focus (Arthur, 2004).

Southeast Asian international graduate students often face discrimination based on their ethnicity and accents, which creates significant communication barriers (Suh et al., 2019). Due to language challenges, these students may struggle to understand lectures, participate in class discussions, and effectively communicate their ideas. Such experiences can negatively impact their academic performance and self-confidence.

Southeast Asian international students face significant challenges adapting to the academic culture of U.S. universities (Fischer & Stoddard, 2013). Differences in teaching methods, classroom dynamics, and expectations can be overwhelming. Coupled with the pressure to excel academically, often driven by cultural values, these students experience heightened stress and anxiety (Ameer, 2021; Atteraya, 2021). Balancing academic demands with personal life becomes increasingly difficult in this new environment. Understanding these challenges is crucial for providing adequate support.

Southeast Asian international students encounter numerous challenges while adapting to their new academic environment (Rienties et al., 2012). Divergent teaching styles and assessment methods necessitate significant adjustments to their study habits. Financial constraints and time commitments from part-time work often hinder academic progress. However, strong social networks, including peer support, faculty mentorship, and access to campus resources, can significantly mitigate these challenges (Davidson & Demaray, 2007) and contribute to overall well-being and academic success (Marthoenis, 2018; Atteraya, 2021).

Southeast Asian international students often experience significant mental and emotional challenges while adapting to their new academic environment. Academic pressures and cultural adjustment contribute to stress, anxiety, and feelings of isolation (Ameer, 2021; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999). These factors can negatively impact academic performance, well-being, and physical health (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). Building a sense of belonging within the university community is crucial for mitigating these challenges and fostering student success.

Social support, English language proficiency, and academic performance significantly influence the acculturative and academic stress experienced by international students (Marthoenis, 2018). Marital status and cultural background also impact these stress levels. Social interactions with other international students can increase stress, while visa regulations can further compound these challenges (Poyrazli et al., 2004). By identifying the unique stressors faced by Southeast Asian international students, this study aims to develop effective support strategies and foster a more inclusive campus environment.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study delves into the experiences of Southeast Asian international graduate students navigating the challenges of academic and acculturative stress in the United States. By understanding their unique struggles, the research aims to inform the development of targeted support programs, empowering international students to thrive in their new environment and achieve both academic success and overall well-being.

The study focuses on the complexities of academic and cultural adjustment faced by these students. This includes adapting to unfamiliar teaching and learning styles, grading standards, academic expectations, and the intricacies of American social norms, values, and customs. These adjustments present significant challenges as students master new academic skills and strategies while navigating a different social landscape.

To shed light on these challenges, the study investigates the following central questions:

How do Southeast Asian graduate students perceive the adjustments encountered while studying in the U.S.?

- What do these students report regarding their experiences on campus?

Drawing on their experiences,

- What strategies and services can effectively address their challenges and support their adjustment?

Through exploring these questions, the study seeks to provide valuable insights that can be utilized to create supportive programs tailored to the specific needs of Southeast Asian international graduate students.

**THE RESEARCH DESIGN**

The number of international students pursuing graduate studies in the U.S. is steadily increasing, reaching a

staggering 645,227 in the 2021/2022 academic year (Duffin, 2023). This trend highlights the crucial need to understand these students' cultural adaptation process upon entering a new academic environment.

The research underscores the significant impact of stress on international students' academic success (Oyeniyi et al., 2021; Kyunghee, 2021) emphasizes that over the past decade, over a million international students have enrolled annually in the U.S., facing considerable academic transition stress that often affects their performance.

There has been a dramatic increase in international student enrollment, particularly from Asian countries. The trend in the number of international students in the U.S. over the last ten years (Figure 1) and the origin of international students, as illustrated by Figure 2, underscores the urgency to address their unique academic transition needs.
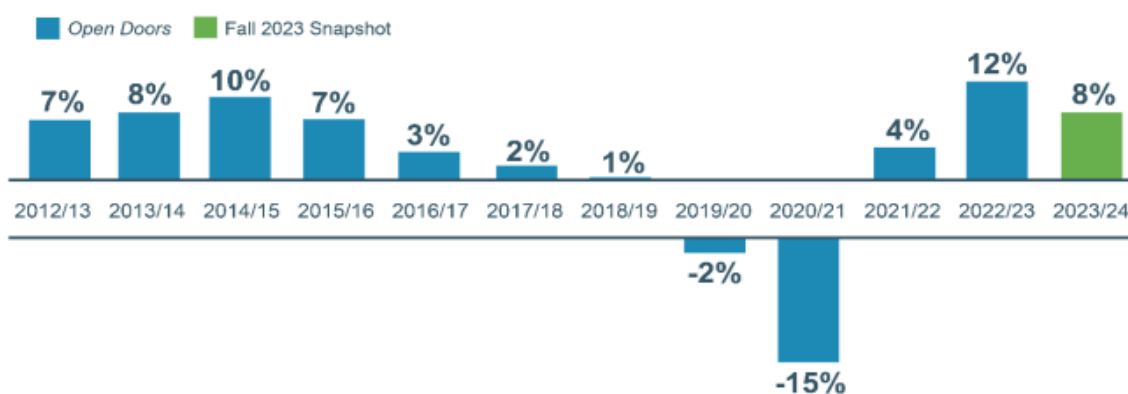


**Figure 1: International Students at U.S. Higher Education, (IIE, 2023)**

PLACES OF ORIGIN OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

| | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | % of total | % change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **WORLD TOTAL** | **914,095** | **948,519** | **100.0** | **3.8** |
| China | 317,299 | 290,086 | 30.6 | -8.6 |
| India | 167,582 | 199,182 | 21.0 | 18.9 |
| South Korea | 39,491 | 40,755 | 4.3 | 3.2 |
| Canada | 25,143 | 27,013 | 2.8 | 7.4 |
| Vietnam | 21,631 | 20,713 | 2.2 | -4.2 |
| Taiwan | 19,673 | 20,487 | 2.2 | 4.1 |
| Saudi Arabia | 21,933 | 18,206 | 1.9 | -17.0 |
| Brazil | 14,000 | 14,897 | 1.6 | 6.4 |
| Mexico | 12,986 | 14,500 | 1.5 | 11.7 |
| Nigeria | 12,860 | 14,438 | 1.5 | 12.3 |
| Japan | 11,785 | 13,449 | 1.4 | 14.1 |
| Nepal | 11,172 | 11,779 | 1.2 | 5.6 |
| Bangladesh | 8,598 | 10,597 | 1.1 | 23.2 |
| United Kingdom | 8,028 | 10,292 | 1.1 | 28.2 |
| Iran | 9,614 | 9,295 | 1.0 | -3.3 |
| Pakistan | 7,475 | 8,772 | 0.9 | 17.4 |
| Germany | 5,364 | 8,550 | 0.9 | 59.4 |
| Turkey | 8,109 | 8,467 | 0.9 | 4.4 |
| Spain | 5,781 | 8,165 | 0.9 | 41.2 |
| Colombia | 7,107 | 8,077 | 0.9 | 13.6 |
| Indonesia | 7,489 | 8,003 | 0.8 | 6.9 |
| France | 5,643 | 7,751 | 0.8 | 37.4 |
| Kuwait | 6,846 | 5,923 | 0.6 | -13.5 |
| Hong Kong | 5,878 | 5,848 | 0.6 | -0.5 |
| Italy | 4,894 | 5,695 | 0.6 | 16.4 |
| Other Places of Origin | 147,714 | 157,559 | 16.6 | 6.7 |

**Figure 2: The Origin of the International Students**

Therefore, the challenges are unique for graduate students, but especially for Southeast

**RESEARCH DESIGN OF THE STUDY**

This study utilizes an Exploratory-Descriptive Qualitative (EDQ) design, a flexible and adaptable approach that combines exploratory and descriptive elements within a

qualitative framework (Hunter et al., 2018). EDQ allows for a deep and comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena, like the academic and acculturative stressors faced by Southeast Asian international graduate students in U.S. higher education.

EDQ is particularly valuable for this study because it allows researchers to:

*Explore new areas of inquiry*

Examining the specific experiences of Southeast Asian students, a less-studied population provides valuable insights into their unique challenges.

**Generate Hypotheses.** The study can identify potential factors contributing to stress by gathering rich qualitative data and uncovering effective coping mechanisms.

**Gain deeper understanding.** Going beyond pre-existing knowledge, EDQ allows researchers to uncover nuanced experiences through direct engagement with participants, ensuring a holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Polit & Beck, 2008).

This design offers a distinct advantage over solely relying on existing literature, particularly given the country-specific nuances of international students' experiences. EDQ, drawing on the work of Stebbins (2001) and Sandelowski (2000, 2010), allows for detailed descriptions of the phenomenon, illuminating the specific challenges and hidden aspects of the acculturative and academic stressors these students face. The research methodology aligns with the study's objectives by:

**Providing a platform for participants' voices.** EDQ prioritizes capturing the unique perspectives and experiences of the students (Hennink & Kaiser, 2019).

**Enabling a comprehensive understanding.** The study utilizes data triangulation by analyzing interview and focus group data to ensure a robust and credible analysis (Scandura & Williams, 2000).

Ultimately, this design provides a framework to comprehensively understand the academic and acculturative adjustments faced by Southeast Asian international graduate students, encompassing their struggles with diverse teaching styles, social norms, grading standards, academic expectations, values, and customs.

**Participants and Recruitment Strategy**

This research focuses on understanding the experiences of Southeast Asian international graduate students with academic and acculturative stress while studying in the United States. To ensure a representative sample, the study employs the following participant eligibility criteria and recruitment strategy:

**Participant Eligibility**

*Southeast Asian International Graduate Students*

Participants must identify as Southeast Asian and be currently enrolled in a graduate program (Master's or Doctoral) at a U.S. institution or have graduated from such a program within the past five years. Participants must hold a valid student visa or any other visa that allows them to study in the U.S.

**Recruitment Strategy**

The study welcomes participants from anywhere in the U.S., ensuring diverse perspectives from various academic institutions and regional contexts. The research aims to engage ten participants who meet the eligibility criteria.

**Diversity Emphasis**

The recruitment process prioritizes participant diversity to encompass various experiences and perspectives. This includes considerations like representation from various Southeast Asian nations to capture unique cultural nuances. Participants from different academic fields to reflect the diversity of graduate studies. A mix of students at different stages of their academic journey, from recent arrivals to those who have graduated, to capture the evolution of acculturation and stress.

This comprehensive approach to participant eligibility and recruitment allows the study to capture a rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives from Southeast Asian international graduate students navigating the academic and cultural challenges of studying in the U.S.

**Sampling**

To ensure the quality and relevance of the research, participant selection is guided by four key considerations: sample size, representativeness, accessibility, and sampling strategy (Cohen et al., 2000). This study employs a combined approach of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants.

*Purposive Sampling*

This strategy allows for the selection of participants based on their specific knowledge and experiences relevant to the research questions (Ary et al., 2002; Maxwell, 2013). By targeting Southeast Asian international graduate students, the study ensures that participants can provide valuable insights into the challenges and experiences of this specific group.

*Snowball Sampling*

This technique involves utilizing existing participants to identify and recruit additional participants within their social networks (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This approach helps expand the study's reach and diversify the sample by tapping into existing social networks and professional associations of Southeast Asian international graduate students. To maximize participant recruitment and ensure the inclusion of diverse voices, the study employed snowball sampling, a method that leverages existing connections within the target population (McMillan, 2004). This approach allows participants to recommend individuals within their social networks who share similar characteristics and meet the study's eligibility criteria. By Connecting with participants geographically dispersed across the U.S., ensuring a diverse range of perspectives. Easing concerns about sharing personal information by allowing participants

to connect with a trusted individual within their network creates a more comfortable environment for participation (Naderifar et al., 2017). Creating a chain of referrals leads to quicker identification of qualified participants, allowing for a faster and more efficient recruitment process. Establishing a shared understanding and cultural connection between initial and subsequent participants fosters smoother communication and a more cohesive research experience.

This approach allows for a more inclusive and impactful study, benefiting from the unique perspectives and experiences of Southeast Asian international graduate students who might otherwise be difficult to reach. This strategy proves particularly beneficial for this study, as it allows for a more representative sample of Southeast Asian international graduate students who may be spread across various locations and hesitant to participate in a study exploring sensitive topics like academic and acculturative stress. Combining purposive and snowball sampling techniques is crucial for ensuring a diverse and representative sample in this study (Cohen et al., 2000). This strategic approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the academic and cultural stressors faced by Southeast Asian international graduate students in the U.S. Selecting the right sampling strategy is vital for qualitative research, considering factors such as time, cost, and accessibility (Corbin & Holt, 2005).

This study's purposive and snowball sampling is ideal because it enables the researcher to focus on individuals with firsthand knowledge of the phenomena under investigation, ensuring rich and relevant data. Identify participants open to sharing their insights and experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of the research topic. Gather valuable data from participants who can provide insights into navigating and responding to academic and acculturative stressors, leading to a more robust and insightful theory (Corbin & Holt, 2005). By carefully selecting participants through these methods, the study aims to provide a comprehensive and authentic exploration of the experiences of Southeast Asian international graduate students navigating the complexities of academic and cultural adjustment in the U.S.

## Data Collection

This qualitative study employed individual semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method to understand the academic and acculturative stressors faced by Southeast Asian international graduate students in U.S. universities.

## Data Collection and Analysis
### Semi-structured Interviews

The interviews explored participants' experiences with academic stressors, cultural adjustments, and the utilization of support services, allowing for a deeper understanding of their adaptation processes, well-being implications, and coping mechanisms.

### Interpretive Hermeneutic Analysis

The collected data were analyzed through an interpretive hermeneutic approach (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), enabling researchers to interpret the meaning and significance of participants' experiences within the context of their cultural backgrounds and academic journeys.

Participants shared their experiences navigating U.S. immigration policies, adapting to new cultural norms, adjusting to academic expectations, and integrating socially. The interviews explored participants' strategies to overcome these challenges and successfully integrate into the academic community and culturally responsive organizations. By analyzing these diverse perspectives, the study aimed to provide valuable insights into the unique experiences of this student population, ultimately contributing to the development of more effective support systems to promote their success and well-being.

## Interviews

Data collection for this study relied on semi-structured interviews conducted virtually, ensuring accessibility for participants across the U.S. The researcher designed interview questions in simple, straightforward language, focusing on eliciting information about understanding the specific challenges faced by Southeast Asian international graduate students in U.S. higher education institutions. Exploring how participants navigate and adapt to these stressors. The interview protocol, informed by existing literature and theoretical frameworks, provided a structured framework while allowing for flexibility. This semi-structured approach, a vital advantage of this method (Halpern & Aydin, 2020), enabled participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences. The researcher could also adapt the questions and incorporate follow-up inquiries based on the flow of the conversation, ensuring a rich and nuanced understanding of the participants' perspectives.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, each semi-structured interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, providing ample time for in-depth exploration. The interviews were conducted virtually through Zoom Video Conferencing, allowing for flexibility and accessibility.

## Data Collection and Recording
### Video and Audio Recording

All interviews were recorded using Zoom's video conferencing feature and a password-protected audio recorder as a backup, ensuring data preservation. Participants had to record with video on or off, respecting their privacy preferences.

### Note-taking and Memos

Detailed notes were taken during each interview to facilitate follow-up questions and identify emerging themes. Post-interview memos were created to explore initial ideas further and develop coding categories. Zoom's automatic

transcription service was utilized for initial transcriptions, followed by a thorough manual review to ensure accuracy.

## Ethical Considerations
### *Informed Consent*

Before each interview, informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring they fully understood the study's purpose, their rights, and the confidentiality of their information (Gill & Baillie, 2018). Participants were allowed to ask questions and withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. The interview process was guided by a topic guide, which used open-ended questions to encourage detailed descriptions and personal experiences. This allowed participants to raise relevant issues and express their perspectives freely.

With its flexible and adaptable nature, the Exploratory-Descriptive Qualitative (EDQ) design provides a robust framework for exploring complex phenomena within a qualitative paradigm. Key strengths of the EDQ approach include acknowledging and reflecting upon potential biases and researcher positionality is crucial to ensure the integrity and trustworthiness of qualitative research (Stebbins, 2001). Utilizing diverse data collection techniques, such as interviews and focus groups, allows for a comprehensive exploration and deeper understanding of the specific experiences of Southeast Asian international graduate students (SEAA) regarding academic and acculturative stressors. EDQ fosters the generation of new hypotheses and the development of a more profound understanding of complex phenomena. The independence of EDQ from pre-existing knowledge makes it particularly valuable for delving into under-researched areas, especially when existing literature is limited (Hunter et al., 2018; Polit & Beck, 2008).

By employing this robust and adaptable approach, this research aims to provide valuable insights into the experiences of SEAA students, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of their unique challenges and potential solutions.

### Data Analysis

This research explores the experiences of Southeast Asian international graduate students in the U.S. using a combined inductive and deductive approach to data analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The study draws upon two theoretical frameworks: Asian Critical Theory (AsianCrit) (Berry et al., 2022) and Berry's Stress and Coping Model of Acculturation (BSCMA) (Berry, 1997). AsianCrit provides a critical lens for understanding the power dynamics and social structures that affect Asian students, while BSCMA helps illuminate the unique stressors and coping mechanisms associated with acculturation.

The research prioritizes understanding the "lived experiences" of these students through in-depth interviews, emphasizing a dynamic process of data collection and analysis. As suggested by Sarker et al. (2013), ongoing engagement with the data throughout the research process allows for continuous analysis and interpretation. Braun and Clarke (2013) emphasize the vital role of writing in qualitative analysis, arguing that it is a tool for constructing a compelling narrative that connects data to existing research.

The research employs a systematic approach to data analysis, incorporating open coding, categorization, and validation techniques (Kieft, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2013). This involves reviewing transcribed interviews to avoid overlooking data elements (Farokhzadian et al., 2015), comparing interview portions, and reflecting on participants' identities and practices. The analysis also involves presenting findings to participants for verification, allowing them to modify their responses and ensuring accurate interpretation of their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The researcher further collaborates with a dissertation advisor to enhance the quality and integrity of the data (Ihantola & Lili-Anne, 2011). A comprehensive assessment is conducted throughout the notetaking and analysis process to extract meaning from the phenomenon under study (Braun & Clarke, 2013). It adopts an "experiential" approach to understanding, moving beyond the limitations of traditional theoretical lenses and embracing the concept of their lived experience as a primary source of knowledge (Zahavi, 2018). This approach prioritizes understanding individuals' choices, actions, and resulting knowledge within their unique contexts. Data analysis is primarily conducted using Dedoose, with a systematic coding scheme employed to categorize and organize participant interview responses (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This coding strategy is essential for identifying critical data segments and facilitating the integration of diverse information.

The coding process involves a multi-step approach. This preanalytical step utilizes Microsoft software to organize and sort data within a matrix format. The researcher examines the interview transcripts, identifying keywords and responses that illuminate the research questions. The identified information is documented and categorized within a Microsoft Excel matrix. The researcher continues to review and code data until confident that all research questions have been comprehensively addressed.

The analysis of participant stories reveals four core experiences. Exploring the unique paths and challenges encountered during academic pursuits. Unveiling the specific pressures faced by these students within their academic environments. Examining the financial hardships faced by Southeast Asian graduate students. Understanding the complexities of adapting to a new culture and navigating cultural differences.

These findings highlight the critical need for culturally responsive support systems to address the specific academic, social, and emotional needs of Southeast Asian graduate students. By providing tailored resources and support mechanisms, universities and educational institutions can create a more inclusive and welcoming environment for this diverse student population. Table 1 details the analytical process used to identify this study's findings.

**Table 1.** *Findings of the Study*

| Findings | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Academic Journey** | **Cultural Adaptation** | **Social Well-being** | **Support Systems** |
| Includes motivations, experiences, challenges, and successes in pursuing higher education in the US. | It covers the difficulties of adjusting to U.S. culture, the education system, and social norms. | Focuses on the impact of academic and cultural stressors on the interviewee's mental and social well-being. | Examine the types of support the interviewee received and identify areas where support could be improved for international students. |

| Themes | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Cultural Differences** | **Adaptability and Resilience** | **Importance of Community** | **Value of International Perspectives** |
| The participants highlight the differences in academic systems, communication styles, and social expectations between their home country and the US. | The Participants emphasize the importance of flexibility, seeking support, and reframing challenges as opportunities for growth. | Participants highlight the role of social connections and support systems in navigating academic and cultural transitions. | The participants discuss the benefits of cross-cultural learning and understanding in academic settings. |

| Concepts | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Cultural Stressors** | **Social Support Networks** | **Cultural Awareness and Sensitivity** | **The Value of Internationalization** |
| These are the pressures and anxieties associated with navigating a new culture, particularly within the academic environment. | Family, friends, colleagues, and mentors are essential for emotional and practical support. | The interviewee expresses a belief in respecting diverse cultural backgrounds and the importance of valuing individual experiences. | This concept involves recognizing the benefits of diverse perspectives and experiences in enriching academic and professional settings. |

Note: This table presents the data's thematic analysis, highlighting key categories, themes, concepts, and associated codes.

Table 1 presents the study's key findings, emphasizing the critical need for culturally sensitive support services for Southeast Asian graduate students in the U.S. Participants shared their experiences of academic, financial, and cultural challenges, revealing the significant toll these stressors take on their mental and emotional well-being. Despite these hardships, their stories demonstrate remarkable resilience as they strive for academic success in a foreign environment.

**Researcher's Reflexivity or Positionality Statement**

As an educator, my top priority has always been to provide my students with the highest quality education possible. This study delves into my positionality and perspective as an educational researcher through a qualitative lens. I aim to establish a comprehensive framework for understanding diverse viewpoints by introducing collaborative learning. My experience is instrumental in empowering young citizens to recognize and claim their efforts' value confidently.

Although my current position might not define my future trajectory, I recognize the potential pitfalls of my social location. My efforts to support education in postcolonial contexts may be perceived as patronizing, insensitive, or even imperialistic (Vanner, 2015). The educational leadership program has exposed me to numerous challenges, including social and economic issues, immigration issues, and the constant need for patience. Despite these hurdles, I have learned patience is often crucial in addressing and overcoming them.

Gender discrimination is a widespread issue across the world. Although I come from a middle-class family in India, I have witnessed the ongoing struggle against gender disparity. My journey of overcoming parental concerns and

societal apprehensions to pursue my college education is a testament to personal agency's significance. However, I understand that I need to be cognizant of my experiences and how I have overcome these challenges. This is imperative so that I do not expect the same outcomes from the participants in the study.

Creswell and Creswell (2018) define reflexivity in qualitative research as critically examining the researcher's role, background, and culture regarding the study's themes and data interpretation. This study demonstrates my commitment to improving my positionality to succeed as an educational leader. Vanner (2015) insightfully observes that researchers bring their opinions, values, beliefs, and social backgrounds into the research process, influencing every methodological and analytical choice. I adopt the self-concept as a research instrument, acknowledging that my subjectivity influences the project and its findings. Aware of the inherent hierarchical dynamics in research, I strive to engage with community members (the participants in this study) in ways they deem valuable, setting aside preconceived notions of how I can contribute (Vanner, 2015).

*Integrating my positionality and objective*

My role as a doctoral student has introduced unique challenges regarding research autonomy. Although my social location provided me with certain privileges, such as access to knowledge, education, and, potentially, race and socioeconomic status, it was simultaneously constrained by the established university hierarchy (Vanner, 2015). These experiences have profoundly shaped my understanding of knowledge, education, and the dynamics of society and family, serving as the foundation for my positionality and perceptions. I firmly believe that self-reflection and reflexivity in research go beyond simply reporting results. They involve asking critical questions and unpacking how findings emerge from our experiences. Ultimately, understanding my positionality and perceptions inform the development of a grassroots collaboration model, offering several benefits to SEAA's experience in the U.S.

**Trustworthiness, Transferability, and Credibility**
**Trustworthiness**

In any qualitative research study, ensuring the reliability of the findings is crucial (Wang & Lien, 2013). Unlike quantitative research, where the goal might be to find a definitive answer, this is not so in qualitative research. However, the approach builds a trustworthy understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Morse, 2015). This trustworthiness comes from the accuracy with which the researcher captures and represents the studied experiences (Ihantola et al., 2011). Imagine it like capturing a snapshot of someone's life to reflect their reality as trustfully as possible.

Researchers strive to build trust and confidence in their conclusions to achieve this fidelity. This aspect is essential because researchers collect, analyze, and interpret the data (Morse, 2015). Thus, the researcher ultimately takes responsibility for the quality and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

**Transferability**

In qualitative research, transferability denotes the extent to which research findings can be applied across different contexts (Morse, 2015). This allows researchers to compare and contrast various studies, leading to a richer understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Burchett et al., 2013). Transferability is often viewed as the qualitative equivalent of external validity in quantitative studies (Morse, 2015). Although directly transferring findings from one context to another may not always be possible, researchers can use the transferability phase to consider how their results might be relevant in different settings. Providing detailed data and descriptions is crucial to facilitate this process (Morse, 2015). Such transparency allows readers to assess the findings and determine their potential applicability to their contexts. Additionally, other researchers might build upon the study by contributing complementary findings from their work.

**Credibility**

In qualitative research, credibility is the foundation for trustworthiness, ensuring that the findings accurately reflect the participants' experiences (Farokhzadian et al., 2015). Achieving this requires clarity throughout the research process, from its design and implementation to presenting findings. It also requires that reviewers possess expertise in qualitative research methods to evaluate credibility effectively (Guzys et al., 2015). However, investing in credibility is essential. Just like trust in any relationship, it takes time and effort, but the payoff is research findings that are meaningful, believable, and impactful.

Though the concept may seem straightforward, measuring credibility in qualitative studies presents challenges, as it involves confirming that findings accurately reflect participants' experiences. Appelman and Sundar (2015) suggest asking participants to rate the study content as accurate, authentic, and believable. I accomplish this through member-checking, giving the participants an overview of the findings, and asking if the information accurately reflects what they hoped to convey.

**Significance of the Research Design**

Braun and Clarke (2013) pointed out the significance of a study plan as the foundational blueprint for a qualitative study. They further stated that the plan incorporates the study's goal, the theoretical lens, the research questions, ethical considerations, and the methods used to generate and analyze the data. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), the planning phase is the research process's initial and most critical stage. Without a well-constructed plan, the researcher's and the participant's time could be squandered. Linares Lopez et al. (2013) noted that research planning focuses on developing the best methods for exploring the research topic. The study plan is determined by

epistemological commitments (Hays & Wood, 2011). For example, a phenomenological theoretical approach shapes the study to explore participants' lived experiences (Hays & Wood, 2011).

A researcher's choice of study design is guided by several factors, including their skills and preferred methodologies (Hays & Wood, 2011). This includes the type of questions they want to answer, as different questions call for different approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2013). To help researchers navigate these choices, Braun and Clarke (2013) offer a list of common questions that can guide their decision-making process. To remain ethical in my choice of research design, I engaged in answering the list of questions recommended by Braun & Clark, which are:

- What am I aiming to discover, and why is it important to me?
- What are my theoretical and methodological stances?
- Which type of data will most effectively answer my questions?
- What data do I plan to use to achieve my research objectives?
- How much data will be sufficient?
- What strategies will I employ to gather and analyze my data?

When choosing a research design, many options and factors must be considered. Hays & Wood (2011) suggest that researchers should base their design decisions on the existing knowledge related to their topic. This means carefully considering their field's existing research, paradigms, and traditions. As a novice researcher, I thoroughly engaged in the suggested process as I considered my research paradigms, such as my beliefs about the nature of knowledge and its creation. These beliefs helped me understand why choosing this research design fits the phenomenon I hope to explore (Hays & Singh, 2011). The knowledge of the participants selected for this study needs to be elevated and shared so that institutions can understand the nuances of having targeted support for Southeast Asian international graduate students. Perhaps the most poignant part of the focus of this study is not just the ethnic identity but the centrality of graduate students, a population often given lesser attention in higher education.

**Protection of Human Participants**

To ensure ethical conduct, I completed the CITI training mandated by the University of Hartford (Appendix A) and secured approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before commencing research. My dissertation committee provided valuable guidance throughout the process. I adhered to all applicable laws and policies at institutional, local, state, and federal levels.

## LIMITATIONS

Similar to other research designs, this study is subject to certain limitations. One significant limitation is the sample size. With only the sample size of 10 participants and limited geographic representation, this research may not fully capture the diverse employment experiences of all international doctoral students in the U.S. (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, the study focuses on Southeast Asian international students either currently pursuing or recently completed their graduate studies, limiting participation to only a tiny portion of the international population in higher education. Furthermore, researcher bias represents a potential concern (Ross & Bibler Zaier, 2019). The researcher was mindful of this and worked to minimize its impact on the interviews, focus group, data analysis, and conclusions. Additionally, the presence of the researcher during the interview and the focus group could influence participant behavior or responses due to factors such as similar race or ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and position (Mirick & Wladkowski, 2019). The researcher acknowledges this possibility and creates a safe, inclusive environment for open and honest discussion.

## SUMMARY

This qualitative research explores the academic and acculturative stressors faced by Southeast Asian international graduate students in U.S. universities, filling a gap in the existing literature. The recent surge in this student population, coupled with concerns about their academic challenges, financial burdens, well-being, career development, and access to support services (Das, 2022), underscored the need for this study.

This paper outlined the critical research components: a restatement of the problem, guiding research questions, chosen research design, the process of selecting participants, data collection methods, data analysis procedures, the researcher's positionality and potential biases, the significance of the research design, limitations of the study design, and a concise summary of the chapter.

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