

**Teaching Culturally and Linguistically Diverse International Students in Open and/or
Online Learning Environments: A Research Symposium**

**The Transitional Experiences of West African Graduate Students to
Living and Studying in Atlantic Canada**

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to provide four former graduate students a public platform to share their personal accounts about the challenges, supports, successes, and other factors that facilitated, or hindered, their transitions from Africa to Canada. Factors that are investigated include cultural differences that pose problems in adapting to a western lifestyle and culture. Government and community programs that help these new Canadian residents to adapt to a new climate, society, and culture are also referenced in individual sections. The effects of social separation from their families, friends, and community, collectively, are also of interest. Another common problem facing African students, in their new environment, is the lack of adequate financing to permit them to fully concentrate on their academics. Many must work in service-oriented jobs to subsidize their studies. Many also struggle to obtain permanent residence status and to gather enough money to bring other family members from Africa to live here.

This presentation is organized to present common findings from the four individual experiences of our graduates. Each of the African Canadian immigrants have either become permanent residents or are in the process of becoming permanent residents, and they will share their experiences in the individual pieces that follow a similar format. The four former students write from a personal perspective, providing a first-hand account of their personal transitions to living permanently in Canada. Some concluding observations are also offered about how their collective experiences point to what has been described in the literature as intellectual colonization.

Keywords: immigration, social separation, inadequate finances, African graduates, intellectual colonization.

Introduction

The authors, several students from Ghana, Cameroon, and Nigeria, and their Memorial University professor, demonstrate the students' reasons for moving to Canada to undertake graduate studies in educational leadership. In this collection, four former graduate students share their personal accounts about the challenges, supports, successes, and other factors that facilitated, or hindered, their transitions from Africa to Canada. Factors that are investigated include cultural differences that pose problems in adapting to a western lifestyle and culture. Government and community programs that help these new Canadian residents to adapt to a new climate, society, and culture are also referenced in individual sections. The effects of social separation from their families, friends, and community, collectively, are also of interest. Another common problem facing African students in their new environment is the lack of adequate financing to permit them to fully concentrate on their academics. The undervaluing or devaluation of their credentials appears to be a form of intellectual colonization by our Canadian institutions.

As is indicated in the four individually authored sections of this paper, many immigrating graduate students struggle to obtain permanent residence status and to gather enough money to bring other family members from Africa to live here. Each of the African Canadian immigrants have either become permanent residents, or are in the process of becoming permanent residents, and they share their experiences in individual pieces that follow a similar format. The four former students write from a personal perspective, providing a first-hand account of their personal transitions to living permanently in Canada. The introduction and conclusion are authored by their professor.

Literature Review

Education is seen as a significant concern for all societies since it is the foundation and essential driving force of economic, social, and human development, and is at the heart of the change in the areas of science, technology, economics, and culture (Lashgarara, Mirdamadi, & Hosseini, 2009). Students worldwide seek educational opportunities in countries other than their own to get advanced education capable of introducing them to foreign cultures to make them tolerant. However, many international students face challenges, as they pursue higher education outside of their home countries. According to Wu et al. (2015), they face obstacles, such as different food, unfamiliar living circumstances, financial problems, balancing work, studying schedules, learning styles, or any difficulties related to language, culture, and personal barriers. They continued that international students perceive isolation and loneliness when they are studying in the U.S. In a recently conducted research, among 900 international students in Australia, Russell et al. (2010) found that 41% of international students experience a substantial stress level, including homesickness, cultural shock, or perceived discrimination. The assertions of Wu et al. (2015) and Russell et al. (2010) were not different from what the former graduate students in this study have encountered as international students in Canada.

Methods

Comparative personal narratives are the main methodological approaches used by the authors. Data are contained within the qualitative sharing of their stories.

Questions that guided our work included:

1. What are those factors that contributed, or hindered, the success of my transition from African education to Canadian education?
2. How did these factors contribute, or hinder, to the success in transitioning?
3. What are the solutions to these factors?
4. Do these factors affect academic performance?
5. How prepared was I for the transition: culturally, financially, academically, and socially?

Results

Personal Narratives

The former graduate students in this study are international students from Ghana, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Each of them had acquired undergraduate degrees in their home countries, with high academic averages prior to coming to Canada. They all had begun successful careers, but each of them wanted to improve their personal circumstances and those of their families. The following is a partial list derived from the personal narratives of this group.

Social Separation from Their Families

Each member of this group made individual, personal sacrifices to migrate to Canada. One of the group members left behind a new bride and a firstborn child, another could only take the older of two children, and others also made great personal sacrifices.

Communication Barriers

Another common finding contained in the individual narratives was an accent difficulty both in speaking and in listening. They noted that even though they came from English-speaking countries, used across all levels of education in the country, the accent is slightly different from Canadian English, especially Newfoundland English. This made communication a bit difficult because they had to repeat themselves many times before being understood. Increased attention was required, all the time, to understand professors and classmates. They observed that even though professors and some classmates understood the situations of these international students, the members of this group felt embarrassed, and it served as a stumbling block to participation in class. Assignments were taken to the writing centre, before they could meet the Canadian-writing standard, which was a bit frustrating.

Inadequate Finances

Another common observation was the inadequacy of finances. Each graduate student came to Canada as a fee-paying student (without scholarship or funding) so each had to work to pay tuition. International students in Canada could only work for twenty hours a week outside the campus, and any hours more than that could result in their deportation. How to survive and pay their school fees became a daily dilemma that psychologically affected them, making it challenging to concentrate on academic work.

In all these difficulties, the writers noted that the professors and the university's orientation program, organized for new students, motivated and helped them to complete their

programs successfully. With all their communication barriers, everyone at the university had the time, and the patience, to understand and assist them whenever they needed help. The campus orientation was also referenced as having given them insights into the nature of their programs and how to be successful. The internalization office also helped to overcome all immigration issues. The student immigration representative advised how many courses to take online, and those to take in-class, so they could qualify for a post-graduate work permit after program completion.

Discussion and Conclusion

An overall observation that can be made about these four African graduates is that they have maintained a healthy and positive attitude towards the immigration and life in their new country. This is in spite of institutional practices and governmental policies that tend to discriminate against their smooth transitioning into Canadian society. The reluctance of many licensing bodies across many of our professions to recognize credentials from developing countries poses one of the most serious problems for immigrants to earn wages comparable to resident Canadians with similar levels of education. The majority of our graduates work in occupations that have recruitment difficulties, and often for wages that are not at all commensurate with their academic qualifications or professional experiences.

These writers indicated that issues such as political instability, concerns for personal security, and economic instability in their native countries make life in Canada preferable to what they have left behind. One observation about returning home, from one of our students, indicated that often, when they return from studying in the west, that they become targets of criminals who feel that they must have money. Returning residents, he said, are sometimes kidnapped and held until a family pays a ransom for their release. Factors such as these serious safety concerns tend to lessen the sting of uninviting immigration practices, such as those that they experienced in Canada.

The stories that are shared, while they cannot be generalized to a population, provide enough information to suggest additional study of the problems preventing successful and smooth integration of immigrants into the Canadian society. We are undergoing soul searching reviews of how our Indigenous populations in times past were colonized, and, based on these personal accounts, it appears that this country continues to colonize new immigrants in more sophisticated, but yet, insensitive ways. The question about whether or not intellectual colonization is any less egregious than past colonial practices is a matter of debate. The practice of attracting the brightest students to immigrate from developing, and so-called third world, countries is also something, it seems, that fails to meet a high ethical standard of practice for this country. Is Canada being hypocritical in trying to “Indigenize the Academy,” as its immigrant students are intellectually colonized?

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