

Roles of the Office of International Students and Scholars Services in Enhancing International Student Retention at a Selected Higher Institution in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

This study adopted a qualitative research method to investigate the role of the Office of International Students and Scholars Services (OISS) in enhancing international student retention at a selected higher institution in Kazakhstan. A phenomenological approach was employed to explore the lived experiences of the participants, which included ten first-year international master's students and the head of the OISS to identify the institutional support services provided by the institution. Tinto's Model of Student Retention guided the study and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data, which were then analyzed thematically. The findings of my study indicated several barriers influencing retention, such as socio-cultural adjustment difficulties, language barriers, academic pressure, limited access to psychological support, and financial stress. Hence, the study highlighted several effective institutional support services provided by the OISS to international students within the institution, including visa and documentation assistance, academic workshops, Grade Point Average (GPA) tracking system, cultural events and Russian/Kazakh language classes. However, the study also revealed gaps in academic peer mentorship, psychological services, and financial advocacy. The research highlighted that student retention is beyond enrolment; rather, it involves creating an inclusive academic environment. The study concluded by recommending the development of more effective institutional support services to help in the adjustment and integration of international students within the selected higher institution. This study provided key insights for policymakers, university administrators, and educators aiming to enhance institutional support services that foster a more inclusive academic environment and boost international student retention.

Keywords: Institutional support services, international student retention, higher education institutions, Kazakhstan

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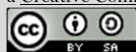
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INTRODUCTION

Globally, there is an increased focus on internationalization in the attraction and retention of a diverse student body in higher education institutions. According to Orth (2015), international students are beneficial to their host country. Moreover, they contribute to the economic benefits of the country, create a sense of cultural diversity, and increase the reputation of their host institution. However, the academic and social barriers pose a threat to the international students, making retention challenging. As noted by Zhao (2021), there is significant concern in higher institutions globally regarding international student retention, reflecting the growing value of boosting institutional reputation and ensuring future overall success for students from various backgrounds. One of the most prestigious higher education institutions in Kazakhstan has rapidly developed into a global competitive institution by attracting and supporting international students within their institution through innovative

strategies. Hence, there is a need to develop effective strategies to improve the retention rate of international students within the institution.

Retention strategy is a tool used to create a friendly environment where international students feel belonged and can thrive both culturally, socially and academically through engagement (Kassab et al., 2024). An institution can achieve notable progress in the retention rate of international students with the assistance of the Office of International Students and Scholars Services, as it is recognized to have a great impact on the integration and retention process of international students within an institution. Research has shown that proactive measures, including orientation sessions, academic counselling, and monitoring, tend to be more effective in the adjustment process of new international students, serving as an eye-opener to the expectations of the institution (Tinto, 2017). Furthermore, the opportunities for students to learn diverse traditions and cultures are created through cultural events, enabling them to integrate culturally and socially within the institution with ease. While the selected prestigious higher institution in Kazakhstan has existing effective strategies for attracting international students from different parts of the world by providing full scholarship opportunities and offering huge discounts to fee-based students, many international students still experience difficulties in adjusting to the new academic environment and new culture, posing a threat to the retention of the students.

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of the first-year master's international students within the selected higher institution in Kazakhstan and examine the role of the Office of International Students and Scholars Services in addressing the students' challenges to ensure retention. The findings highlighted key insights into how institutional support services can enhance retention of international students within an institution by creating a more inclusive and supportive academic environment.

Statement of the Problem

Retaining international students has become a major concern in higher institutions recently. Higher education institutions globally are facing pressure to reduce student dropout rates and develop new, effective support strategies to encourage students to continue their academic journey (Khan et al., 2024). These institutions, through recruiting international students and offering academic programs, promote internationalization. However, there is limited empirical study on how institutional support addresses the integration and adjustment challenges experienced by international students in higher institutions in Kazakhstan (Kim, 2020). This presents a limitation to the development of effective inclusive support within the institutions. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate how the Office of International Students and Scholars Services promotes the retention of international students at the selected higher institution in Kazakhstan to increase the retention rate of international students.

Purpose of Study

This study aimed to examine the challenges faced by international students at the selected higher institution and investigate the institutional support services offered by the Office of International Students and Scholars Services in enhancing international students' retention within the institution.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study.

1. What are the socio-cultural and academic challenges experienced by international students at the selected higher institution?
2. How do the support services provided by the Office of International Students and Scholars Services respond to the challenges faced by international students?
3. How do the support services provided by the Office of International Students and Scholars Services enhance retention of international students?

Significance of the Study

The research will be beneficial to Kazakhstani universities, particularly the selected university, in providing valuable insights into effective institutional support services required in enhancing international student retention. It will also be relevant to international students, as the study identifies the effective institutional support services available for a better academic and social integration process, creating a more supportive and inclusive environment that directly impacts their academic experience. The government policymakers may benefit, as the study unveils the importance of institutional support services in international student retention leading to refined internationalization policies and optimizing resource allocation across universities in Kazakhstan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transitioning for any graduate student is always a challenging process, regardless of their native language and nationality (Zhang, 2016). Therefore, host higher institutions should incorporate effective retention strategies to reduce the attrition rate of international students within their institutions.

The retention of international students has become a top priority in higher education, as higher institutions globally seek to attract and support a diverse student body. According to (Bukhatir et al. 2023), high retention rates are widely seen as positive indicators of institutional quality and reputation. However, low retention may indicate issues in academic programs or student support. A study by Krsmanovic (2022) highlighted that international student retention is crucial as it promotes campus diversity and cross-cultural interaction, enhancing learning for all. Thus, to ensure the continuity of international students, it is necessary to address the unique challenges they experience in their host institutions.

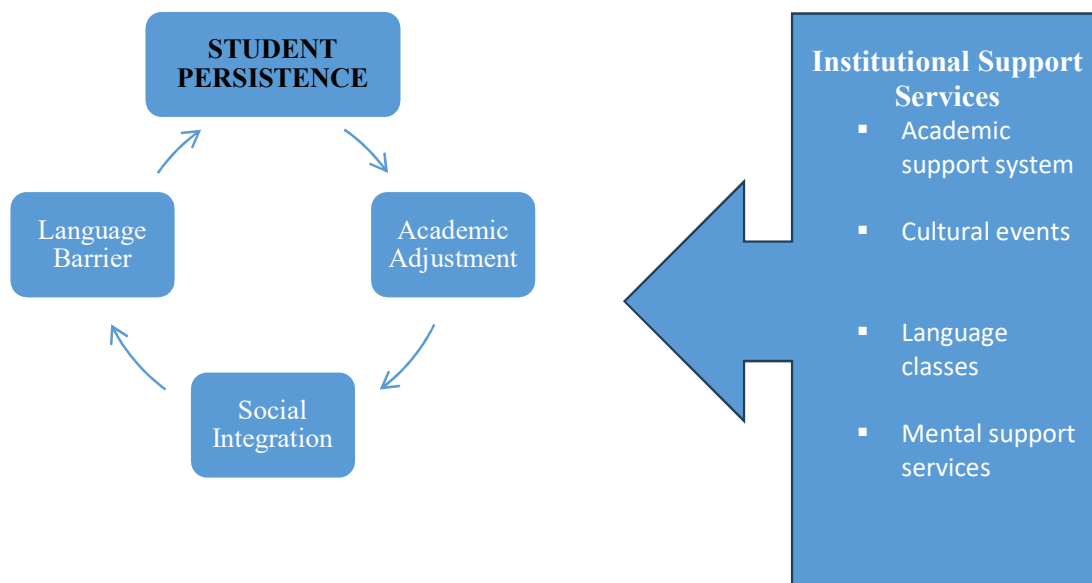
Research has shown a range of cultural, social, and academic barriers that may impact international students' persistence in an institution. Moreover, international students who are admitted to their host institution with a new culture often encounter challenges relating to socio-cultural adaptation, including adjustment to new social norms and customs (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024). Culturally and socially, while the process of adjustment differs from one student to another, during the initial transition phase, socio-cultural differences, language barriers, climate and food differences create significant challenges to the international students such as confusion, homesickness, culture shock and isolation which impact their mental well-being, socio-cultural integration, academic success and overall engagement (Almukdad & Karadag, 2024). Martirosyan et al. (2019) argued that a lack of supportive peer networks or social isolation has been associated with lower satisfaction of international students, resulting in a high attrition rate. Furthermore, it can be quite challenging to build friendships and cultivate a sense of belonging in a foreign environment due to cultural and language differences. However, the support the international students receive greatly influences their integration process (Tsegay et al., 2018).

Academically, most international students must adapt to new language environments and different academic systems, which can be stressful and challenging. Moreover, adapting to the

academic system of the host institution is directly related to the learning environment of an academic institution, including the lecture style, the relationship between students and lecturers and the assessment methods. International students from different educational backgrounds may feel a significant difference when beginning their academic journey in the host institution with the Western learning style (Zhang, 2016). Consequently, the basic goal of most international students is to achieve good academic grades in their chosen higher institutions abroad. Academic challenges are at the forefront of both student and institutional concerns. It is well noted that academic adaptation is a fundamental requirement in the overall process of the student adaptation experience in a foreign environment, and academic achievement has a great impact on student socio-cultural integration, mental well-being, and vice versa (Manyeruke & Tansel, 2024). Olagunju (2024) highlighted that classroom integration and academic performance can be hindered by unfamiliar teaching or assessment methods. Therefore, without effective institutional support, social and academic pressure may challenge the student's integration process into the new environment resulting in student attrition. However, institutional support services including orientation programs, counseling, cultural exchange events, and academic advice, help promote a sense of belonging and connection for international students, enhancing their integration and retention (Olagunju, 2024). These institutional support services aligned with Martirosyan et al. (2019), who mentioned that when universities strategically support international students academically and socially by providing clear guidance on visa regulations, language support, and opportunities for cultural engagement, retention is achieved.

Conceptual framework

This study adopted Tinto's Model of Student Retention in exploring the role of the Office of International Students and Scholars Services in enhancing international student retention at the selected higher institution. This model emphasizes that the level of academic and social integration of international students within their host institution shapes their persistence (Tinto, 1993).



This chart describes the link between the academic and social integration level of international students and their persistence in the host institution. However, the institutional support offered can help in their adjustment and integration process, enhancing retention within the higher institution (Krsmanovic, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The Office of International Students and Scholars Services (OISS) was examined in my study to identify the institutional support provided by the selected higher institution in Kazakhstan in enhancing international student retention. A qualitative research method was employed in my study using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of international students and their thoughts on the institutional support provided by the OISS (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Participants

The study included participants from two groups: The Head of Department (HOD) of the Office of International Students and Scholars Services (OISS) and 10 international master's students in their first year of study consisting of four males and six females from diverse countries: Ghana, Pakistan, and Nigeria. All participants were selected through purposive sampling, allowing the researcher to choose respondents with similar traits relevant to the research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015). This approach aimed to obtain comprehensive and reliable data on the challenges experienced by international students and their perception of the institutional support provided by the Office of International Students and Scholars Services. The criterion for participant selection focused on international master's students in their first year of study at the selected higher institution, as they had been newly admitted to the institution and had new transitioning experiences and the HOD of OISS to gain detailed information about the institutional support services of the selected higher institution.

Demographic Table of Respondents

Country	Gender	Number of Participants (students)
Ghana	Male	1
	Female	2
Pakistan	Male	2
	Female	2
Nigeria	Male	1
	Female	2
		Total 10

Data Collection Instrument

The primary method of data collection used in this study was semi-structured interviews which lasted approximately 45 minutes each. All the interviews were conducted face-to-face to obtain comprehensive details and clarify questions that the respondents could not understand (Kallio et al., 2016). The interview aimed to collect data on the international students' experiences while adjusting to their host institution. Therefore, the research questions were related to their academic and socio-cultural adjustment and the institutional support services they received from their host institution. The researcher ensured that the interview was conducted in English as it was the medium of instruction within the selected institution. Being an international graduate student too, I experienced the challenges and institutional support mechanisms provided by my university. However, I positioned myself as a researcher in order not to be biased while conducting the research study. The interview was divided into two sections, one for the Head of Department of Office of International Students and Scholars Services and the other for the international students including main questions along with follow-up questions which were utilized to gain appropriate responses from the respondents. The questions covered the academic and social challenges experienced by the students, their perception towards the institutional support services in resolving their challenges and the

effective institutional support services provided by the Office of International Students and Scholars Services in enhancing student retention.

Furthermore, the study employed thematic analysis to analyze the data collected from the interviews and provide a meaningful interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Thematic analysis is most appropriate for understanding participants' stories about their life experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021). After the interviews were transcribed and the data read repeatedly, different themes were identified and developed using descriptive coding which was used to reduce and organize the data into meaningful themes. The emerging themes were classified and provided a detailed summary of various responses, enabling the researcher to analyze the findings in line with the guiding research questions (Elliott, 2018).

Ethical considerations were applied in the study and full consent was gained from the participants by explaining the nature and purpose of the study. Hence, to ensure their rights were respected, the participants were given the option to withdraw from the process at any point they felt uncomfortable (Shaw, 2003). Pseudonyms were used in the study to ensure anonymity and protect the identity of the participants. Moreover, confidentiality was maintained by securing the data of the participants in a database that was only accessed by the researcher.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings of my study were grouped into two sections: barriers to international student retention and the institutional support services offered by the Office of International Students and Scholars Services in promoting international student retention.

Barriers to International Student Retention

Research has shown that language and cultural differences pose threats to international students within an institution, leading to low social integration and adjustment process, which impacts their retention (Wilczewski & Alon, 2022). Moreover, international students at the selected higher institution are faced with similar challenges. According to Atobatele et al. (2024), during the early stages of international students' academic journey they experience difficulties in integrating and adjusting to the new culture, norms, and overall academic environment leading to feelings of isolation and homesickness. Consequently, four students who were interviewed reported feelings of isolation, particularly in class when working in groups and having informal conversations where local language was used. A student stated, "I feel isolated most times when I am among the locals and they speak their dialect." Without a sense of social integration, international students may feel excluded, increasing the risk of leaving the institution.

Furthermore, communication barrier also limits access to essential services for student well-being. A study by Glass et al. (2015) highlighted that language and cultural barriers greatly impact international students' access to campus services and overall engagement. Two students noted the inability to access the psychology services when needed due to the communication gap as most staff in the psychology department lacked English proficiency. However, Bierwiazzonek and Waldzus (2016) indicated that improved psychological and academic outcomes are associated with socio-cultural adaptation of international students, particularly the ability to communicate and access campus services.

Academic adjustment presents another significant issue for international students, threatening retention. Moreover, differences in the academic system, assessment, teaching styles and expectations between international students and host institutions can lead to stress and confusion as international students may struggle to adapt to the new academic system impacting their motivation and overall confidence (Atobatele et al., 2024). From my findings,

five students noted initial difficulties while adapting to the university's academic system, assessments, and expectations. One of the students stated: "I experienced difficulties in the academic system at the initial stage because it was different from my home country." The Western academic style upheld by the selected university was seen as challenging for students with different educational backgrounds as they were new to the Western education system. While three students acknowledged the role of the Office of International Students and Scholars Services (OISS) in organizing research and writing workshops, the overall finding highlights insufficiency in the delivery of academic support, although it was highlighted by the HOD of the Office of International Students and Scholars Services that effective measures are being put in place for better academic support. This gap was partially attributed to role ambiguity across departments which may lead to low academic performance of the international students.

Finally, the findings highlighted the lack of advocacy for international students, especially regarding financial burdens and dormitory fees. All participants shared their feelings about the commercial rates included in dormitory fees for students staying during vacation, which mainly affected international students because they often cannot afford to go home and prefer to stay in the dormitory. Unfortunately, during this vacation period, they are expected to pay thrice the normal fee, which they find challenging and financially burdensome. Charging international students a commercial rate for dormitory fees during vacation increases their financial stress, threatening their retention.

Support Strategies Provided by the OISS

Improving international student retention requires comprehensive strategies that address academic, cultural, social, and financial factors to ensure overall integration (Atobatele et al., 2024). Responding to the challenges faced by international students at the selected university, the HOD of the Office of International Students and Scholars Services mentioned some effective strategies provided by the institution. The HOD emphasized the importance of providing full support to international students as soon as they arrive at the host institution, which broadens the focus from solely visa and legal support to include academic and social integration assistance. It was also noted that the Office of International Students and Scholars Services is launching a new program that pairs incoming international students with continuing local and international students to help them adjust and foster a sense of belonging on campus. All students interviewed agreed that the Office provided effective visa regulation guidance, documentation support, and orientation sessions upon arrival.

In response to social adjustment, the Office of International Students and Scholars Services organizes cultural events such as "World on Wednesday" among students. These programs bring diverse cultures together, fostering intercultural engagement and enhancing international students' sense of belonging. These events go beyond promoting cultural literacy to create an environment where international students can share their experiences and identities, which significantly contributes to their social integration. Additionally, language skills and effective institutional support mechanisms are crucial factors that ensure positive socio-cultural integration and improve students' academic performance (Wilczewski & Alon, 2022). Therefore, the institution implements effective strategies to overcome language barriers, making it easier for international students both within and outside the host institution. Moreover, the Office of International Students and Scholars Services offers Russian and Kazakh language classes to equip international students with basic language skills for daily communication and to boost their confidence, helping them fully integrate without feeling isolated among peers.

Lastly, the Office of International Students and Scholars Services recognizes that poor academic performance at the selected university leads to stipend loss, thus posing a threat to potential dropouts. Therefore, they ensure that the international students are not prone to this,

as it is their main source of income. This is achieved by implementing the Grade Point Average (GPA) tracking system to identify students at academic risk, analyzing the cause of the poor performance, and providing tailored support to assist. In addition, the Office of International Students and Scholars Services also supports international students in academic adjustment by organizing academic workshops to guide them through the new academic system, which was reported by one of the students.

Retention of International Students

The support services provided by the selected institution were used to enhance international students' retention. The visa and legal services provided were essential in increasing retention and aligned with Timmis et al. (2024), who highlighted that offering comprehensive support upon arrival reduces initial anxiety and ensures a smooth onboarding process, fostering a sense of institutional support. The organization of language classes and social events for cultural exchange was crucial in boosting the international students' retention. This approach aligned with Glass et al. (2015), who highlighted that language programs significantly enhance international student engagement and satisfaction, which are essential for retention. In addition, the targeted academic support provided by the institution aligned with Nel et al. (2016), who mentioned that academic skill development programs can enhance international students' ability to adjust to a new academic system and improve retention.

CONCLUSION

Kazakhstani universities, particularly the selected higher institution, provide effective institutional support services to enhance international student retention by addressing visa regulations issues, academic and socio-cultural challenges. However, there is room for improvement to ensure a better integration process for international students as retention goes beyond just enrollment of international students to fostering a sense of inclusivity, belonging and overall engagement. The study highlighted that both institutional support and students' efforts are crucial in integrating and adjusting into a new academic environment (Tsegay et al., 2018). Hence, to ensure a smooth transition process in the new environment, international students need to be provided with effective coping strategies by the institution, such as participating in the language classes and familiarizing themselves with local students to enhance communication. To increase the retention rate of international students at the selected higher institution in Kazakhstan, there is a need for more cultural exchange programs and academic support mechanisms to promote international students' socialization and improve their academic performance. While the selected higher institution in Kazakhstan offers full scholarships and stipends to international students, the high cost of living expenses and limited assistantships remain a concern. However, the higher institution could establish a financial support mechanism, such as granting international students the opportunity to work a maximum number of hours weekly to complement their financial aid. In this regard, the selected higher institution needs to improve its strategies to ensure a smooth transition of international students within its institution.

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