

**From Expectations to Reality: Examining International Students' Perception of Support
Services at the University of Pittsburgh**

by

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
School of Education in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education

University of Pittsburgh

2019

UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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University of Pittsburgh, 2019

American colleges and universities have developed various programs and services meant to attract and support them. The success of those programs and services is usually assessed from an institutional perspective mostly through quantitative or occasionally qualitative methods. Only a handful of qualitative studies have looked into how international student themselves view the academic and nonacademic services set up for them by host institutions. The purpose of this study was to explore how international students at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education perceive the academic and nonacademic support services they receive and to contrast that perception with their prior expectations. The theoretical framework was a qualitative phenomenological approach. It was used to describe and understand student experience of support services. The instrument and protocol used to gather data from ten SoE international students are semi-structured interviews. The ten interviewees were selected among ten leading countries of origin for international students at SoE. The sample population was the international student population at Pitt School of Education. The sampling method was a non-probabilistic purposeful criterion sampling. The method of analysis was a document analysis using Giorgi's inductive four-step phenomenological analysis coupled with a thematic content analysis. The analysis of the data showed that most respondents had clear expectations of receiving comprehensive, in-depth quality instructional content, hands-on academic guidance, and theory as well as practice in research methodologies. It also revealed very mixed levels of perception of service quality. Perception of

service quality varied depending on the type of support services received and on the personal experiences of each individual student. The analysis of the data finally revealed that most respondents were overall satisfied with the academic and nonacademic support services received from the university of Pittsburgh and from the School of Education.

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1.0 Introduction

According to the Institute of International Education (IIE), international students account for 5.5% of U.S. college and university enrollment (Open Doors, 2018) (See Appendix A). This percent represents over a million matriculated students from around the world who are studying in very diverse fields in the United States. The international higher education sector represents over \$20 billion in the U.S. economy (Institute of International Education, 2016), making higher education one of America's top exports. At the University of Pittsburgh, international students, sensu stricto, represent nearly 11% of total enrollment¹. The overall percentage of international students at Pitt stands as a testament to the university's historical leaning towards hosting international students. Even though the University of Pittsburgh's mission statement does not explicitly make an institutional promise to meet the specific needs of international students, the university has put a great deal of institutional effort into promoting international education and recruiting international students and scholars². By launching "Embracing the World: A Global Plan for Pitt" in 2016, the University of Pittsburgh seems to show its commitment to internationalization and global education. "Embracing the World" outlines a strategy for not just expanding and strengthening overseas partnerships and programs but also for sustaining efforts to welcome international students and scholars. Another illustration of this commitment is the fact that the University of Pittsburgh is currently ranked amongst the top U.S. universities of provenance for Peace Corps volunteers and Fulbright scholars (University of Pittsburgh, 2018).

¹ <https://www.pitt.edu/about>

² <https://www.pitt.edu/about>

Moreover, in 2017, the University of Pittsburgh received the Senator Paul Simon Award for Comprehensive Internationalization. This award, granted by the Association of International Educators (NAFSA), is an important recognition of the University's success in achieving "overall excellence in internationalization efforts as evidenced in mission, strategies, programs, and results" (Appendix B).

Despite those accolades, however, one of the challenges faced by many institutions of higher education of the size and type of the University of Pittsburgh remains their inability to promptly and effectively address the aspirations and unique needs of international students all while serving the general aspirations of the broader student population (Wang, 2004).

1.1 Successfully Supporting International Students

Throughout my twelve-year experience as a student advisor, international education professional and college faculty, I have increasingly been interested in understanding how newly-admitted college/university students adjust to their new environment, especially when they are pursuing schooling outside of their culture or country of origin. For many students, the university experience is fulfilling and rewarding, but for many others, it can be painful and traumatic (Russell et. al, 2008). According to Hayes et al. (1994), students tend to perform poorly as a result of: (1) hindrances regarding their academic integration, (2) financial difficulties, and (3) challenges adjusting to the university social subculture. In the United States, as in many other countries, foreign students are unfortunately not immune to the problems and to the threats or challenges facing their American counterparts. They are confronting compounded hardship that can quickly

make their circumstances worse, such as language and cultural cues acquisition, homesickness and lack of social integration in the host communities (Sherry et al., 2010).

To better serve students and scholars amidst an ever-evolving world (Paul, 2005), colleges and universities have set up academic/research and administrative departments that are all immersed in an ecosystem of support services such as libraries, Information Technology, student life, financial aid, etc. Student support services typically refer to an array of specialized services and activities geared towards making students' university experience successful. Student support services are designed to assist all matriculated students without exception: students from all fields of study, whether they are domestic or international (Andrade & Evans, 2009). For example, most American institutions of higher education hosting international students have implemented a specialized arm generically referred to as the Office of International Students (OIS) (Bista & Foster, 2011). Bista and Foster assert that OIS's are established to specifically provide support to international students and scholars. They are undoubtedly a common fixture of universities across the country and tend to follow a rather standard organizational template. How well are the Office of International Services at the University of Pittsburgh and other student support services meeting the needs of international students?

1.2 Conceptual Framework for Research

As an educator, I have tried to make sense of all the mechanisms at play pertaining to international students in their new countries; the many intrinsic and extrinsic factors that are likely to either facilitate or hinder their long-term success. I have also been interested in obtaining better knowledge of how students' actual experiences align with their expectations prior to obtaining

admittance to university. When interacting with international students, I have often striven to understand how they ultimately perceive the effectiveness of the university support services that are designed to serve and benefit them. Through my experience and through the review of the literature, I found that there is both anecdotal and scholarly evidence that international students are often misunderstood and hold mixed views of university support services.

Through this inquiry, I hoped to develop a clearer insight into the international student's perspective on academic and nonacademic systems of support that are essential steps towards addressing their needs. I also planned to obtain a clear understanding of the prerequisite to building a welcoming host educational community that represents and values an internationally-focused university. I hoped to be able to help universities tap into the wealth of student-related data. I hoped to help institutions of higher education get attuned to truly listen to their international student populations for fact-informed decision making.

The purpose of this inquiry was to describe the university experiences of international students (in their own words and from their unique vantage points) by collecting and analyzing accounts of the ways in which they view university support services. More specifically, this study's goals were twofold:

- First, to examine how international students at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education, a large public research-intensive university, perceive the services they receive and the support systems delivering them;
- Second, to contrast those perceptions against international students' own prior expectations.

The main research questions were as follows:

- 1- What are international students' expectations prior to enrolling at the University of Pittsburgh?
- 2- How do international students perceive the quality of student support services at the University of Pittsburgh?
- 3- What is the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction expressed by international students towards student support services at the University of Pittsburgh?

1.3 Inquiry Methods and Approach

1.3.1 Background

International students are some of the most vibrant members of U.S. higher education. Colleges and universities have developed various programs and services meant to attract and support them. The success of those programs and services is usually assessed from an institutional perspective mostly through quantitative or occasionally qualitative methods. Only a handful of qualitative studies have looked into how international student themselves view the academic and nonacademic services set up for them by host institutions.

1.3.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore how international students at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education perceive the academic and nonacademic support services they receive and to contrast that perception with their prior expectations.

1.3.3 Methods

- Theoretical framework: a qualitative phenomenological approach was used to describe and understand student experience of support services
- Instrument and protocol: semi-structured interviews and document analysis was used to conducted with ten SoE international students selected among ten leading countries of origin for international students.
- Sample population: international student at Pitt School of Education
- Sampling method: non-probabilistic purposeful criterion sampling
- Method of analysis: Giorgi's inductive four-step phenomenological analysis coupled with a thematic content analysis.

2.0 Literature Review

This chapter explores the relevant literature used as theoretical grounding and background for my research. My immersion into the literature has shown that the tools used for investigating students' perception and satisfaction are found at the intersection of such fields as applied sociology (Kingston & Forland, 2008), organizational behavior (Trice, 2004) and even marketing management (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2001).

The review of past and current research as well as of scholarly work led me to outline the following three major subject areas:

- Factors influencing a student's choice to study overseas: motivations and expectations
- Higher education management and international student support services
 - Students as customers
 - International student support services
- Qualitative frameworks and instruments for studying service perception

2.1 Factors Influencing Students' Choice to Study Overseas: Motivations and Expectations

Every year, students leave their home countries and temporarily abandon often very strong social connections and cultural bonds to pursue schooling in foreign countries (Lee & Rice, 2007). In her seminal study of changes in international education patterns post-World War II, McMahon (1992) lists the factors motivating a student's decision (1) to study overseas and (2) to pick a specific host country, university and field of study. McMahon (1992) identifies, on the one hand, the "Push" model as a group of factors at play in the student's home country: economic prosperity or lack thereof, availability of educational opportunities and diversity. On the other hand, she identifies the "Pull" model as a set of factors related to the attractiveness of the potential host countries (i.e., knowledge of host country, recommendations from acquaintances, estimated financial costs and perceived social costs, socioeconomic environment, geographic proximity, and existence of current or past family or friend ties in the host country). Building on McMahon's work, Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) list six additional factors influencing students in their choice to study in a foreign country:

- quality and reputation of the potential host institution
- recognition of the degrees and institution's qualifications in the student's home country
- existence and vitality of host institution's strategic collaborative agreements and international alliances
- quality of the target university's staff and management
- target institution's alumni base and vitality
- current and past international student population.

Expanding on Mazzarol and Soutar's research, Azmat et al. (2013) look into the Push and Pull models through the framework of social psychology by exploring the student's decision-making process to study away from home. Their study focuses on prior aspirations and expectations of Chinese and Indian students towards pursuing university in Australia. They proposed tools for action by separating the decision-influencing factors upon which universities have some leverage from the ones over which universities have little or no influence (p. 82-90) (Appendix D). Once in the host university, students are quickly faced with the reality that their overall success is inextricably linked to the quality of their overall experience (Astin, 1993).

2.2 Higher Education Management and International Student Support Services

2.2.1 Students as Consumers

The student-as-a-consumer model states that universities are primarily answerable to their main constituency: students (McMillan & Cheney, 1996). Under that model, universities set up curricula and support services and they promote an overall environment aimed at benefitting and satisfying the customers/consumers/clients -- the students, in the same way traditional organizations do (Molesworth et. al., 2010). Molesworth et al. (2010) further argue that the phenomenon of marketization of higher education and TQM have greatly and positively contributed to entrenching such ideas as organizational accountability and the pursuit of quality and consumer-centeredness in higher education management. As for international students, Andrade and Evans (2009) argue that U.S. universities must proactively put them front-and-center in their institutional strategic planning by designing effective recruitment and support services.

International students bring financial resources and sometimes much needed diversity to host universities. In their view, international students are a critical resource that needs strengthening (p 43-68). One of the main consequences of intentional student-orientation (and international student-orientation) is that most colleges and universities purposefully work diligently to attract and serve students (Andrade, 2006; Hayes & Lin, 1994). Universities periodically measure students' perception of service offerings and assess students' level of satisfaction towards those services (Clewes, 2003). Remarkably, the idea of education as a service and students as consumers who must be satisfied, is not always welcomed within higher education and among scholars of education. In their assessment of the student-as-a-consumer metaphor in higher education, McMillan and Cheney (1996) lay out four reasons why that metaphor is harmful to the educational process: (1) students are not viewed as an integral part of the educational process, (2) professors are engaged in promotional activities and may be reinforcing the entertainment model of classroom learning, (3) the educational experience is divided up into product categories rather than treated as a process, and (4) individualism is encouraged over the focus on communities. They further (2010) denounce the emphasis put on student's satisfaction as it perniciously undercuts the traditional values of education (p. 3-5). They additionally warn against the potentially detrimental effects of excessive customer orientation on the educational process and on students themselves. They claim that focusing on the satisfaction of the customer-student negates the very nature of educational services which is, by definition, nuanced (p.5-11). They further assert that the single-minded emphasis on satisfying the customer-student underestimates the wide variety of stakeholders in higher education (p. 9-12). They propose an alternate model named Critical Engagement whereby students are included as not just recipients but rather co-creators in the educational process (p. 12-15).

2.2.2 International Students Support Services

International student support services stem from the need to cater to the specific needs of international students (Appendix F) and from the broader institutional imperative to foster students' persistence (Andrade & Evans, 2009).

In the U.S., services that are set up to support international students are generically listed as follows:

- International recruitment services;
- international admission services;
- international orientation services;
- academic support and language services;
- social and intercultural support services;
- legal and immigration support services.

The above-listed services can be grouped into two larger categories: (1) the services that are mainly born out organizational justification (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2012), and (2) the services that originate from federal/congressional or policy mandates such as legal and immigration support services (Wong, 2006). For example, after the 911 terrorist attacks, the U.S. congress enacted the U.S. PATRIOT Act and a series of legislation which, among other provisions, require international student-admitting universities to have certified Designated School Officers (DSO) or Principal Designated School Officers (PDSO) on staff (Wong, 2006). DSO and PDSO liaise with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS)³ and manage the Student and Exchange

³ <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/designated-school-official>

Visitor Information System (SEVIS) (USCIS, 2018), an integrated electronic system aimed at administratively tracking nonimmigrant students in the U.S. International students support services can also be grouped into academic services on the one hand (strictly academic and language support), and nonacademic services on the other (i.e. admissions, financial aid, legal support services, etc.) (Karp, 2011). Furthermore, scholars, such as Pedersen (1991), Sakurako-Chako (2000), Sumer et al. (2008), and Wei et al. (2007) argue that providing consistent and specialized counseling services to international students should be an integral part of the array of support typically provided by universities.

For Marangell et al. (2018), the task of welcoming and integrating international students should not be left to the university community exclusively but should wholeheartedly be embraced by the host communities at large. They advocate for a bold community-based approach to university internalization that would reach far beyond the confines of campuses and benefit both international students and hosts (p.1440-1458). Korobova (2012) demonstrates that the academic success and overall satisfaction of international students (as well as of American students) depend both on the quality of the services they receive and on the intensity of their own engagement in meaningful educational practices in the host community. Scholars have, however, noted that research-intensive universities sometimes fail to provide enough or adequate funding for quality support of their international student population (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2012).

2.2.3 Measuring the (International) Student's Perception and Satisfaction

The systematic assessment of the quality of educational and support services (Joseph & Yakhou et al., 2005) is one of the tools available to education administrators to determine their effectiveness at pursuing and achieving their missions and goals. It is also the basis for evidence-

based decision making in organizations of higher education. That quality assessment could be performed from two distinct perspectives: from an institutional perspective (Aldridge & Rowley 1998) and/or from the viewpoint of the student and his/her experience (Russell, 2005; Oldfield & Baron, 2000; Clewes, 2003); (Wanying et al, 2014; Billups, 2008). In the former, university leaders and administrators seek to evaluate operational performance and efficiency and the potential gaps between tangible institutional outcomes and predefined service quality standards or objectives (Jain & Gupta, 2004). Whereas in the latter, the assessment favors measuring the perception of quality and the level of satisfaction of students (Joseph & Yakhou et al., 2005). There is a growing body of research proposing theoretically grounded student's satisfaction and perception assessment models based on existing methods. Those models fall into two categories: (1) quantitative, and (2) qualitative. While quantitative methods are used to confirm a hypothesis, qualitative ones are favored by researchers trying to gain insight into a phenomenon (Mertens, 2014). While quantitative methods resort to very structured data-gathering instruments such as surveys, qualitative ones use more flexible tools to collect and analyze data: observations, open-ended interview questions and content analysis (p. 225-230).

Brochado (2009) identifies three common categories of service quality perception frameworks:

- Service Quality - SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988)
- Service Performance - SERVPERF (Cronin & Taylor, 1992)
- Higher Education Performance scale - HedPERF (Abdullah, 2006)

Many colleges and universities choose to administer internally designed student satisfaction and perception instruments (Mazzarol, 1998) usually rooted in the precepts of commonly used service quality models (Brochado, 2009). In the context of U.S. higher education

however, the most widely used tools for assessing student's satisfaction and perceptions of educational services quality are the following commercial grade instruments (Miller, 1997):

- Students Opinion Survey – SOS designed and commercialized by American College Testing (American College Testing Inc., 2018);
- Student Survey Inventory – SSI designed and promoted by Ruffalo Noel Levitz (RNL), LLC, a firm specializing in enrollment management in higher education and student success.

The following sections discuss the most common quantitative and qualitative approaches to examining customers' perception of service quality and by extension to examining student perception of educational services.

2.3 Qualitative Frameworks and Instruments for Studying Service Perception

2.3.1 Service Quality – SERVQUAL

SERVQUAL is one of the main research tools aimed at gauging consumer's expectations and perceptions regarding the quality of a given service. SERVQUAL originated from the work of Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988). It is based on the premise that the 5 pillars or dimensions of service quality are:

- tangibles; the outward look of the facilities, staff and equipment delivering the service,
- reliability; the aptitude of the service provider to deliver it in a dependable and accurate fashion,
- responsiveness; commitment to deliver the service in a timely manner
- assurance; the aptitude for the service provider to inspire trust via mastery and respectfulness

- empathy; aptitude for the service provider to display sensibility towards the individual customer

The SERVQUAL instrument is based on qualitative interviews typically administered face-to-face and on twelve focus groups. It consists of 22 pairs of service attributes or items split into the 5 service quality dimensions. Perceived Service Quality is the difference, or the gap measured between Perceived Service (P) and Expected Service (E).

Perceived Service Quality (SQ) = Perceived Service (P) – Expected Service (E)

$$Q = \sum_{x=1}^{22} (P_x - E_x)$$

When SQ is superior to zero, the delivered services exceed the customer's expectations.

When SQ equals zero, the delivered services meet customers' expectations

When SQ is inferior to zero, the delivered services fall short of expectations. According to Đonlagić and Fazlić (2015), SERVQUAL has not been very widely used in the context of higher education. Only a handful of studies have resorted to that instrument in the last decade (Đonlagić & Fazlić, 2015).

2.3.2 Service Performance – SERVPERF

The SERVPERF model emerged as criticisms of SERVQUAL mounted over the years. In 1992, Cronin and Taylor offered to replace the expectation (E) component in SERVQUAL by the concept of performance (P). The SERVPERF interview consists of 22 attribute statements regarding the customer perception of service performance. Service Quality (Q) becomes Performance (P).

$$Q = \sum_{x=1}^{22} (P_x)$$

Jain and Gupta (2004) argue that the SERVPERF framework is a good and practical tool for measuring how an organization “performs” overall quality wise. However, they further assert that in comparison to SERVPERF, the SERVQUAL scale is best suited for comparing service quality across industries (Jain & Gupta, 2004). Wolcott (2001) identifies a total of 19 frameworks, methods and detailed qualitative procedures used by researchers. In the specific context of higher education, researchers have utilized, more or less successfully, qualitative methods to investigate the views and the university experience of students. Creswell & Creswell (2017) list five categories of qualitative methods as follows:

- ethnographies;
- narrative research;
- phenomenological;
- grounded theory;
- case studies.

The following sections focus on reviewing the literature on the above qualitative methods and their effectiveness at investigating people’s experiences and perception.

2.3.2.1 Ethnographic and Naturalistic Research

Ethnographic/naturalistic research or ethnography originates from cultural anthropology and sociology. In ethnography, researchers immerse themselves in cultural groups or target participants’ communities for a significant amount of time in order to understand their goals, behavioral patterns, cultures, and emerging themes (Creswell, 2017). Ethnographic researchers

rely more on first-hand observations than on interviews or surveys to gather data and generate knowledge. This approach is holistic in nature and tries to describe a phenomenon wholly (Cohen, 2002). Nespore (1987) is one of the earliest proponents of ethnographic research in education. His groundbreaking research on the role of belief in the practice of teaching consisted of observing and recording not just the verbal exchanges between teachers and students, but also their actions and interactions in the classroom. Review of the literature suggests that, in comparison to other research frameworks, ethnography has not been very utilized by researchers in education. Pabian (2014) argues that one of the explanations for that fact is methodological: the long-term immersion of informants' or researchers in the target environment is often unpractical. Another hurdle is epistemological: there is a risk that the researcher morphs from "participant observer" to "observer participant" every time they meddle with the phenomenon they set out to observe (p.9-10). For example, Stevens (2007), in his study of college services, arranged to get hired as an assistant with the Admissions Office. As rightly pointed out by Cohen et al. (2002), each situation being, by definition, unique, data yielded from ethnography is non-generalizable. In spite of those potential weaknesses, Pabian continues to see great merit in ethnographic studies in higher education. In his view, ethnography has the potential of yielding much better insights than any other research approaches because of its intensity and duration. He agrees with Nespore's view that ethnographic research would tremendously be strengthened if it were also multi-sited and if it involved multiple researchers at a time (p.5-7). For those reasons, he foresees a resurgence of interest in this type of research (p.16-17).

2.3.2.2 Historical and Narrative Research

Cohen et al (2002) defines historical research as:

The identification and limitation of a problem or an area of study; sometimes the formulation of a hypothesis (or set of questions); the collection, organization, verification, validation, analysis and selection of data; testing the hypothesis (or answering the questions) where appropriate; and writing a research report.

More specifically, historical research, in the field of education, can help deconstruct educational theories and practices and can provide an explanation for why they unfold. Historical researchers rely mainly on documents, artifacts, and narratives (Mertens, 2014). Narrative inquiry consists in building coherent stories by stitching together verbal descriptions of past events (or experiences) made by individual participants. Researchers use in-depth interviews to collect individual narratives and accounts of events. Historical research is not exclusively qualitative as its methods may also rely on quantitative data to establish context and background (p.270-271). Cohen et al. assert that scholars of education widely agree on the undeniable value of historical research and on its unparalleled capacity to investigate educational questions (p. 214-215).

2.3.2.3 Phenomenology

Phenomenology research originates from the concept of phenomenological philosophy posited by Husserl (Zahavi, 2003) and furthered by Heidegger. Proponents of strictly descriptive phenomenological philosophy, state that it is possible to make sense of a phenomenon by relying on the description provided by individuals who witnessed or lived through it (Moustakas, 1994). However, Heidegger and many other interpretive (or hermeneutic) phenomenological philosophers, argue that while it is impossible to truly and directly know the meaning of a phenomenon, it is, nevertheless, possible to know how humans interpret that phenomenon (p. 103). Moustakas (1994) states that phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that describes, reconstructs, and analyzes the interpretation and explanation participants ascribed to a

phenomenon they have experienced or to situations they have lived through. Phenomenology seeks to understand people’s unique perspectives and views of social realities (Mertens, 2014). It describes the components and the mechanism of individuals’ subjective conscious experience (p. 235). In phenomenology, the researcher strives to grasp and describe a phenomenon or a situation as faithfully as possible (Giorgio, 2003).

The phenomenological framework is based on the following key steps (Todres, 2004):

- Articulation of the experienced phenomenon of interest
- Gathering and recording of descriptions/interpretations of phenomenon
- Testing and analysis of descriptions/interpretations of phenomenon
- Drafting of a comprehensive and intelligible report

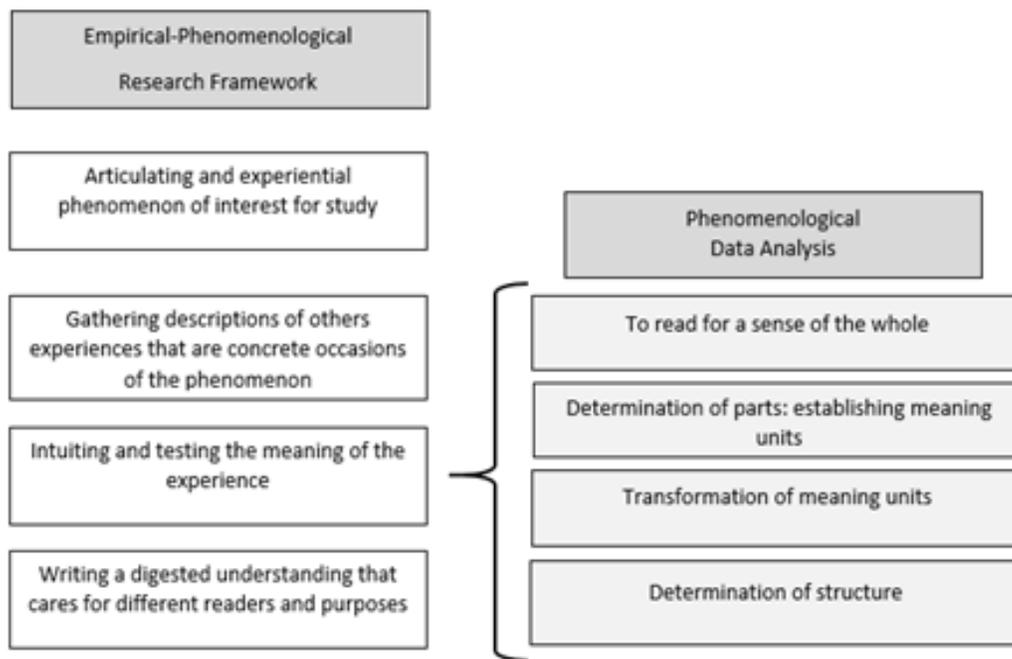


Figure 1. Todres and Holloway’s (2004) Empirical-Phenomenological Framework incorporating Giorgi’s (1985) 4-step method to Phenomenological Data Analysis

Phenomenology as a tool for scientific inquiry relies, not just on open-ended interview questions and verbal exchanges between the researcher and the participant, but also on document reading or site viewing (Moustakas, 1994).

Dall'Alba (2010) notices a growing interest in both philosophical and research phenomenology by education scholars. She explains that relatively recent re-emergence by the fact that phenomenology has the potential of taking a novel and authentic look into such complex education phenomena as online writing, school transition, or professional adjustment (p. 4-70).

2.3.2.4 Grounded Theory

Grounded theory, also called constant comparative method, is interested in understanding the theories behind events or phenomena through careful data collection and analysis (Mertens, 2014). As a methodological framework, grounded theory is based on the presupposition that researchers are able to derive and to formulate a theory out of the meticulous analysis of empirical data. In grounded theory, researchers try to verify hypotheses that emerge as they immerse themselves into the data (p. 236). The grounded theory research process consists of:

- making constant comparisons between collected data and existing related concepts to generate hypotheses,
- theoretical sampling achieved by singling out occurrences of the data that match hypotheses,
- theoretical systematic coding by using such procedures as open and axial coding,
- Line-by-line analysis of coded data by asking questions (who? when? where? what? how? how much? why?) and by pointing out complexities and outliers in order to offer an explanatory theory of phenomena (Mertens, 2014).

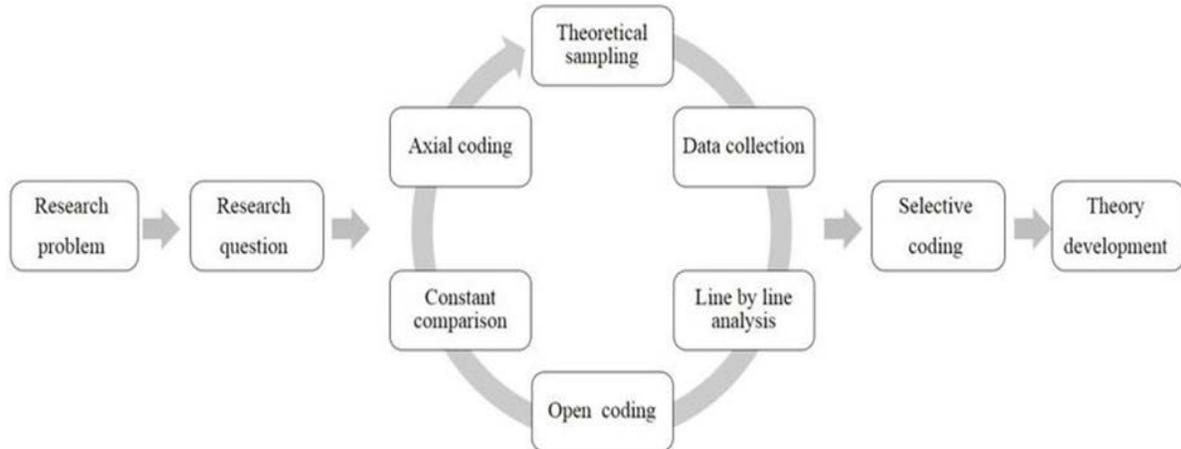


Figure 2. Adapted from Mertens' key methodological features of grounded theory

Grounded theory researchers predominantly use interviews, observations, and existing documents to determine themes and generate a new theory or fine-tune existing ones. Charmaz (2006) states that the main goal of grounded theorists utilizing in-depth interviewing must be to “explore” the research topics instead of to “interrogate” the participants. In their overview of grounded theory design in the context of education, Chong & Yeo (2015) argue that grounded theory is a very adequate research tool because it can help make sense of very complex social phenomena. Initially, the researcher identifies key themes or meaningful/manageable “chunks” of data via unstructured or minimally structured data gathering (p.261). Progressively, using data coding⁴, and potentially, line-by-line coding⁵, the researcher stands on sound footing to begin building a sensible data-informed theory from the ground up (p. 261). One of the main limitations

⁴ The process of grouping similar pieces of data in homogenous or nearly homogenous data subset/categories to make the subsequent analysis easier Cohen et. al (2002)

⁵ refers to the technique of applying a code to each line of an interview transcript (or field notes) in order to allow “new” themes to emerge (Charmaz, 2006)

of grounded theory, however, is that researchers may not be immune from injecting personal biases into their interpretation of the data units and into their formulation of a new theory (p. 264).

2.3.2.5 Case Study

In a case study, a single individual, group of individuals, or event is thoroughly explored, described, and explained (Merriam, 1998). Rather than focusing on formulating theories and concepts, case studies attempt to present actual people facing real-life situations (Cohen, 2002). Not only do case studies have the potential of providing better insights than many numerical approaches, they can also help identify the causes and the effects of a phenomenon (p.253).

Yin, as cited by Mertens (2014), lists five steps to developing a case study design:

- develop of the research questions,
- identify the propositions for the study,
- specify the unit of analysis,
- establish the logic linking the data to the propositions,
- explain the criteria for interpretation of the findings.

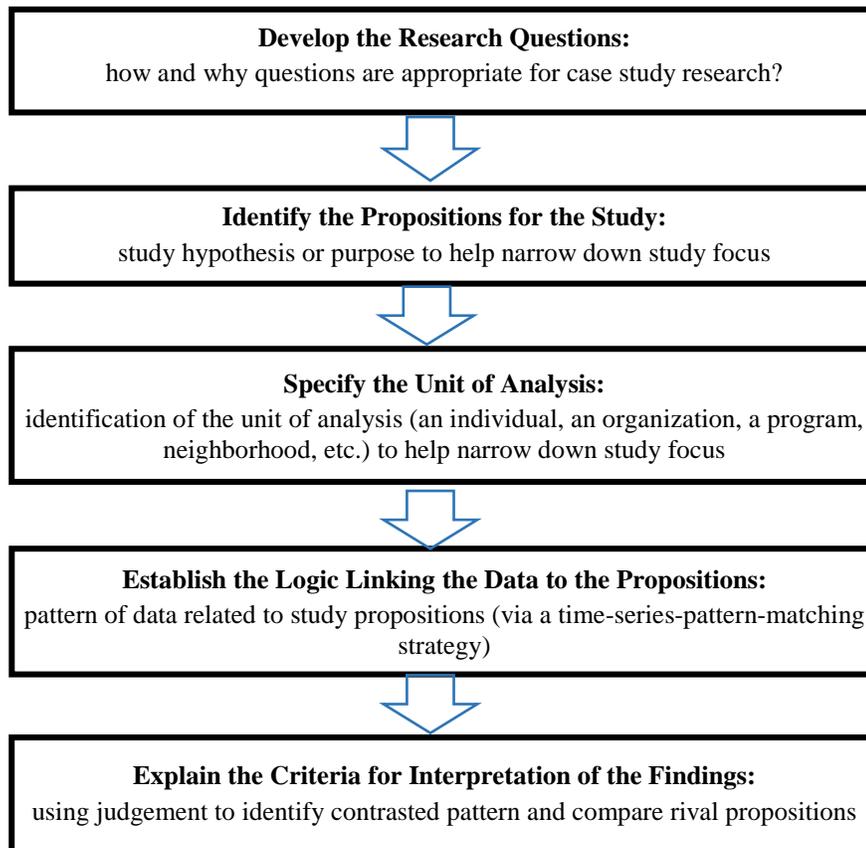


Figure 3. Five Steps for Developing a Case Study Design. Adapted from Yin as cited by Mertens (2014)

Cohen et. al (2002) state that one of the main strengths of case study as a research method in the field of education is that its findings are potentially actionable in the real world. That is, practitioners and policy makers may use the interpretation yielded from case study for self-assessment, institutional introspection, and self-improvement. The major weaknesses of case study are: (1) the findings cannot be generalized, and (2) observer/researcher's biases may taint the process as well as the findings (p.257-258). Beside or in conjunction with qualitative approaches, qualitative ones can also be used to study people's experiences and perceptions.

3.0 Methodology

This chapter covers the research methodology including the study setting, the research design, sampling, data collection, recruitment and consent, survey instrument, interview protocol, proposed data analysis, data protection, and limitations.

I used a qualitative phenomenological approach for this research. According to Mertens (2014), phenomenological approaches seek to understand the unique perspectives, views, and conscious experiences of individuals on social realities (Mertens, 2014).

Historically, studies of student's perception and satisfaction have, overwhelmingly, favored using surveys meant to "take the pulse" of a numerically representative sample of their student body year after year (Bryant, 2006; Abdullah, 2006). Occasionally, researchers have resorted to qualitative focus groups (Miller, 1997) or to qualitative semi-directive interviews (Clewes, 2003; McCracken, 1988) to investigate lived experiences of various educational actors (students, teachers, administrators) or to lay down the groundwork for future quantitative surveys. In other words, quantitative longitudinal approaches have long been preferred to qualitative ones. Only a few qualitative studies have specifically explored student perception of university support services. This research attempts to offer an alternative approach to studying and assessing students' perceptions of support services. My approach is to stay away from the potential trappings of quantitative methods which tend to ignore or minimize individual voices, preferring aggregated large-scale data (Abdullah, 2005; Mertens, 2014). While I agree that such methods have great value, I contend that giving "voice" to students can also have tremendous value. As a research framework, phenomenology strives to unveil the meaning of an experience through the lenses or the voice of the individual participant. In phenomenology, participants' voices are more likely to

be heard. The focus of this study was to understand how international students experience support services. Students' experiences and the meaning they give to them deserve to be heard and phenomenology provides a very good process for hearing individual students' voices.

Semi-structured interviews of international students at SoE were used to conduct this research. Once the interview protocols were completed/recorded and transcribed verbatim, the study used Giorgi's four-step scientific phenomenological analysis coupled with a thematic content analysis to analyze the data collected through interviews.

3.1 Study Setting

The setting for this inquiry is the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. I choose this setting mainly because the international student makeup of the School of Education closely mirrors that of the University of Pittsburgh's. International students account for 11% of the overall Pitt enrollment and they represent 12% of SoE's student body⁶. Another justification for choosing SoE was that the regions and countries of origin of international students attending SoE broadly followed the university-wide "trend" whereby international students come predominantly from Eastern, South Eastern and Middle Eastern Asia as well as from the Northern hemisphere⁷. It is noteworthy that in addition to the afore-mentioned regions of origin, SoE international students come, albeit at a lower proportion, from North Eastern Europe and Africa⁸.

⁶ University of Pittsburgh School of Education: <https://www.education.pitt.edu/AboutUs/FactsFigures.aspx>

⁷ Top-ten countries of origin for international students at Pitt: China (1,661), India (318), Saudi Arabia (133), Republic of Korea (115), Japan (79), Taiwan (77), Canada (54), Iran (53), Turkey (39), Brazil (33)

⁸ Argentina, China, Columbia, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Mongolia, Nepal, Russia, South Sudan, and Taiwan (Source: <https://www.education.pitt.edu/FutureStudents/InternationalStudents.aspx>)

The School of Education is one of Pitt's 20 schools and colleges. It opened in 1910 and is now made up of five academic departments: Administrative and Policy Studies, Health and Physical Activity, Instruction and Learning, Learning Sciences and Policy, and Psychology in Education. Student enrollment is about 1,200. Students receive bachelors, masters, and doctorate degrees along with 30 certificates and other non-degree programs⁹. SoE is ranked in the top 30 best graduate schools of education in the nation¹⁰ (US News, 2018). SoE's international students and scholars are predominantly from Argentina, China, Columbia, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Mongolia, Nepal, Russia, South Sudan, and Taiwan. Since the 1960's, SoE has put an emphasis on fostering domestic and global education through its Institute for International Studies in Education (IISE) and its research, service learning, study abroad, community engagement, and capacity building. SoE seems to be firmly lined up with Pitt's endeavor to promote multicultural, cross-cultural and intercultural exchange and cooperation. That commitment appears to translate into a continuous effort to attract the best students and scholars and to establish local and global partnerships. The School of Education works closely with the University of Pittsburgh's Office of International Services (OIS)¹¹ in order to reach out to potential students overseas and to support them throughout their admission process, and their Pitt experiences. OIS assists students with immigration and cultural adjustment issues. Even though this research was about examining the views of students at SoE, it was not directly investigating SoE as an institution.

⁹ <https://www.pitt.edu>

¹⁰ <https://www.usnews.com/best-graduate-schools/>

¹¹ <https://www.ois.pitt.edu/office-international-services>

3.2 Research Design: Interviews

I chose to conduct a qualitative phenomenological research design through the development, administration and analysis of in-depth semi-directive and semi-structured interviews (Wengraf, 2001).

To gather data, phenomenological researchers usually resort to lengthy, casual and interactive interviews (Moustakas, 1994). My approach was to investigate international students' experiences by having them express their views in their own words through interviews with rather minimally worded prompts. The main justification for choosing a qualitative method of inquiry via semi-structured interviews was that they increase the chances that the study would go deep into respondents' views, values and attitudes (McCracken, 1988) towards support services dedicated to students. Cohen et al. (2002) state that qualitative interviews seek to go to the core of human experience as they allow participants to discuss their understanding and assessment of the world around them and voice their views on circumstances and situations that may or may not affect them. Semi-structured interviews tend to follow a pre-established topic guide or loose script presupposing that the investigators have background knowledge of their research environment as well as of the sample population under study (Legard et al., 2003). The researchers can get background knowledge of their research environment by reading through institutional reports, historical records, and the literature on the topic. Legard et al. (2003) argue that in-depth interviews are meant to allow the researcher to cover all key pre-identified research themes during the interview and ask further probing questions whenever needed, all the while permitting flexibility as to the order in which each theme is brought forth. Legard et al. (2003) further contend that in-depth interviews are by their very nature interactive and explorative because they try to generate a genuine conversation between interviewer and interviewee. Additionally, in-depth interviews help

get to the bottom of the respondent's underlying feelings, reasons and opinions about the subject at hand (Wengraf, 2001). In-depth interviews are therefore not ad-lib exchanges but rather somewhat structured ones. Questions in semi-structured interviews are to be worded in such a way that they do not systematically call for yes or no answers (Wengraf, 2001). Open-ended questions are meant to give the interviewee the chance to elaborate on their experiences and views on a specific theme. They are also meant to give the interviewer an opportunity to follow up on statement or leads deemed relevant to the interview themes or to the overall purpose of the inquiry (Hatch, 2002).

For this research, an example of a predefined themes was (Appendix M):

- The reliability of university services- - support provided by academic and non-academic staff in a timely, accurate and dependable manner,

Related interview questions were as follows:

- a. Is the university student support timely, accurate and dependable?
- b. What were your expectations regarding university student support timeliness, accuracy and dependability?
- c. Are you satisfied/dissatisfaction with the reliability: timeliness, accuracy and dependability of student support services?

Possible probes were as follows:

- Is staff responding to your request for assistance?
- Are health and counseling services accessible?
- Are housing assistance and equipment & IT services accessible and proactive?
- Are recreational facilities and programs available and accessible?
- Are support service promises kept?

- Are support services' opening hours convenient?
- d. Does the staff have a positive attitude? Are they sincerely interested in solving your problems?
 - Is the staff sincerely interesting in solving problems?
 - Are they efficient/prompt in dealing with complaints?
- e. Are there any social and intercultural support services?
 - Are they well communicated?
- f. Are there any students' union and grievance process?
- g. Are there any support service delivery procedures?

I ran two pilot interviews to determine how practical my study would be on the one hand and to find out how relevant and long the answers to the questions could potentially be on the other hand. Through personal acquaintances, I met and interviewed two current SoE international students. Administering those two test interviews helped confirmed that the lead questions, as worded and as articulated, made the verbal exchange flow easily as in a normal conversation. It also made me realize that I would have to be extra careful when recording and transcribing the interviews of the international students at SoE. The uniqueness of each personal narratives may make the respondent susceptible to be recognized by third parties within and outside of SoE. The specific details contained in the personal narratives and the participants' answers (country of origin, duration of stay in the U.S., English language proficiency, past interactions with faculty and staff etc.) may disclose to readers who they are despite my best effort to shield their identity. Through the pilot interview process, I also learned that current students were willing to refer for interview recent SoE graduates whose experiences are relevant to this study.

I prescreened potential participants and recruited the ones who met the list of criteria outlined further in this section. As part of my prescreening of participants, I asked them for their country of origin and inquired if they were nonresident and full-time students²⁰. I subsequently asked them if they had had and would be willing to discuss any of their experiences with academic and nonacademic support services at the University of Pittsburgh (Appendix M).

Semi-structured interviews tend to follow a preestablished topic guide or loose script presupposing that the investigators have background knowledge of their research environment as well as of the sample population under study (Legard et al., 2003). The researchers can get background knowledge of their research environment by reading through institutional reports, historical records, and the literature on the topic. Piloting is usually meant for the researcher to help explore and refine a research topic, to detect potential problems (administrative, technical, timing, material, etc.), or to improve the interview protocol (validity, ambiguities, redundancies of questions and themes) (Cohen, 2002; Legard et al., 2003) prior to conducting the actual research.

Phenomenology research strives to understand people's unique perspectives and perception on social realities (Mertens, 2014) and phenomena. I chose to use a phenomenological research design, because it is one of the best suited qualitative design used by researchers to help describe, reconstruct, and analyze people's perception of a lived experience (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological designs are more likely than other qualitative methods to help capture and analyze the interpretation SoE international students give to their experience of support services. After administrating the interviews, I did not resort to follow-up interviews.

3.3 Research Design: Instrument Design

The phenomenological framework mainly utilizes open-ended interview questions and semi-directive verbal exchanges between the investigator and the participant to collect qualitative data (Moustakas, 1994). I share Tuckman's (2012) view that interviews have a far-superior probing potential than questionnaires and surveys even though administering interviews is likely to cost more. What guiding themes and wording governed the drafting of the interview questions? For this research, I argued that the topic and wording of each open-ended questions (and probe) must directly be derived from both the research questions and from tested education-specific service quality referents. These were, in my view, two crucial requirements if the instrument developed for this research were to accurately capture international students' perception of university support services.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

- What were international students' expectations prior to enrolling at the University of Pittsburgh?
- How do international students perceive the quality of student support services at the University of Pittsburgh?
- What is the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction expressed by international students towards student support services at the University of Pittsburgh?

As underlined in the literature review chapter, Abdullah (2006) performed one of the most thorough comparative study of perceived service quality in higher education. His research conclusively pointed out the strengths as well as the limitations of the generic tools used for analyzing service quality (SERVQUAL and SERVPERF) in higher education. He subsequently

proposed a new analytical tool (HedPERF) based on four key service quality dimensions or factors relevant to the unique context of higher education (Abdullah,2006). Those factors are:

- Non-academic university services: support provided to students by non-academic staff
- Academic university services: support and feedback provided to students by academics as well as the attitude, accessibility, and communication skills seen in those academics
- Reliability of university services: support provided by academic and non-academic staff in a timely, accurate and dependable manner
- Empathy expressed through university services: personalized, intentional and warm attention to students' specific needs.

I contend that the key factors influencing educational service quality as posited by Abdullah (2006) accurately and convincingly depict the reality of higher education service. Hence my choice to use HedPERF's four key factors of service quality in higher education as the leading topics for drafting the instrument for this research. Additionally, I wanted to ensure that all follow-up questions and probes were solidly rooted in this study's research questions.

For example:

- Interview guiding topic # 1: Non-academic university services: support provided to students by non-academic staff.
- Question topic and 1st set of questions: I would like to better understand the academic aspects of the support services you are receiving at Pitt. Feel free to elaborate on your answers.
 - a. What were your expectations regarding the academic aspects of the support services you are receiving at Pitt?
- Probes:
 - Were non-academic staff members knowledgeable and experienced?

- Were they caring and courteous?
- Did they show sincere interest in solving problems?
- Do they have a positive and encouraging attitude?
- Did you receive feedback on your progress?
- Are you satisfied/dissatisfaction with the staff and faculty attitude, accessibility, communication skills, feedback to students?

Ultimately, my aim is to determine whether or not there are gaps between students' expectations and their perceptions of educational services.

3.4 Sample Population and Sample Size

This inquiry focused on the following population: international students at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education (SoE). It sought to explore and analyze the unique and subjective experiences, views and perceptions of the members of that population. In the 2018-2019 academic year, there were 150 matriculated international students, scholars and employees at SoE¹². Each of them constituted the unit of the research population. Given that each student may potentially hold unique or nuanced views about university support services, each unit is seemingly equally deserving of research interest. It would have therefore been ideal to explore and analyze the experiences and views of every single individual within the population of interest. However, although appealing, the prospect of in-depth interviewing every single one of the 150 international

¹² Source: <https://www.education.pitt.edu>

students was unrealistic given the limited resources devoted to this research and given its scope. Cohen et al. (2002) states that researchers do not generally study the entire research population because of such considerations as research budget, time constraints and practicality of access to all the members of that population. Consequently, researchers usually tend to study a sample (or a manageable subset) rather than the whole population. The most common sampling methods are: (1) probabilistic and (2) non-probabilistic (Mertens, 2014). In the former, the researcher uses clearly formulated random or objective selection techniques (e.g. simple random sampling, systematic random sampling, stratified random sampling, and cluster sampling) to pick the right sample units. The latter, however, sometimes relies on clearly formulated sampling techniques and other times relies on the researcher's subjectivity. In this context, subjectivity refers to the judicious use of theory and lessons learned from past and current research to decide which units of the population to include into the sample (Cohen, 2002). Non-probabilistic sampling includes quota sampling, purposive sampling, convenience sampling, snowball sampling and self-section sampling. It is sometimes argued that probability sampling techniques are more reliable than non-probabilistic ones. It remains undeniable that using non-probabilistic sampling can be justified on sound theoretical bases or for pragmatic reasons. Moustakas (1994) states that participants in phenomenological studies should at least have experienced the phenomenon under scrutiny. Therefore, in a phenomenological study, participants should have experienced the same phenomenon. Creswell (2007) further states that in phenomenological framework research the units in a sample should look as homogenous as possible with regards to the set criteria. Cohen (2002) defines criterion-based selection as the specification, ahead of time, of a set of attributes, features and requirements that each unit in the sample must meet. It is a technique whereby participants to a study are selected based on clearly stated criteria (Hatch, 2002). The researcher

needs to make sure that those criteria show in the sample (p. 176). I used non-probabilistic purposeful sampling for this research. More specifically, I used purposeful criterion sampling to select the sample for this study. Criterion sampling was justified for this study because I set criteria that participants must meet prior to being included in the sample. For this study, the cumulative criteria for sample selection were as follows:

- to be an international student, strictly speaking, a student who meets the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) definition¹³ of international student
- to be a citizen of one the top-ten countries of origin as assessed by Pitt Office of International Service¹⁴
- to have experienced student support services both academic and nonacademic student support services. While academic services include strictly academic and language support, nonacademic services are Admissions, Financial aid, legal support services, etc. (Karp, 2011),
- the potential participant must be willing to anonymously and confidentially share her or his experience in detail and have it recorded.

Generally, qualitative research relies on relatively smaller sample sizes than qualitative research. Unlike in quantitative research, sampling for qualitative research is not primarily interested in the representativeness of respondents but rather in a deep and detailed exploration of their experiences (Cohen et al. ,2002) with the goal of yielding rich findings (Hatch, 2002). One of the guiding principles for deciding on an adequate sample size in qualitative studies is saturation.

¹³ Department of Homeland Security (DHS) defines international students as nonresident students who are enrolled in a full-time and on a temporary basis in a college/university program typically under a J1 or F1 visa category. This definition excludes resident alien students, refugees or naturalized U.S. citizens (DHS, 2018).

¹⁴ China, India, South Korea, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Canada, Iran, Brazil, and Germany (Appendix D)

Saturation is the idea that increasing the number of units in a sample would not necessarily improve the quality of the data collected or yield additional insight (Glaser, 2017). Creswell argues that a sample size between 5 and 25 units should be enough for phenomenological studies (2017) and for saturation. They are currently 150 matriculated international students at SoE¹⁵, but I limited my participant selection to ten international students; ten current undergraduate and graduate SoE international students picked from among the 10-leading student-providing foreign countries as assessed in Pitt's Office of International Services 2018's report. By limiting the sample size to ten international students, I wanted to take the time to discuss, with each individual participant and at a personal level, all the themes related to student support services. I wanted to get a deeper insight into the international student's perception of support services in order to glean as much information from each of them as possible. Even though my primary goal was not representativeness of sample, I wanted to make sure interviewees' country of origin and international student status or lack thereof do not dramatically skew my subsequent analyses.

3.5 Recruitment and Consent

I approached international students through a formal call for participation in the study (Appendix K) posted on SoE's public announcement boards scattered throughout the hallways and premises of the SoE. Solicitations to participate in the inquiry were voluntary and uncompensated basis. Potential participants would let me know of their interest via email or text. Two of the international students who were initially considered to participate in the study ended up not being

¹⁵ Source : <https://www.education.pitt.edu>

interviewed. One was not interviewed because of recurring scheduling conflicts making it impossible for both parties to agree on a date and time for an interview. The other one turned out to be an international student enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh Kenneth School of Art and Science who got mistakenly referred to me by one of his SoE friends. A couple of minutes into the interview, when it became clear that the respondent was not a SoE student or had never attended SoE, I stopped the recording, apologized to the student for the oversight, and made a more conscious commitment not to assume that the students who are referred to me are SoE students. I deleted the recording file and thank the student for his time. While five of the participants responded directly to the call for participation flyer, the other five were referred to me by three of the initial five participants. Participants signed an informed consent agreement form (Appendix L) and were informed of the goals for the inquiry prior to beginning the interview. Participants were not asked to share their names and dates of birth. I concluded and sorted out applications within 14 days of public posting.

The ten students who xxx fall into one or many of the following categories.

Countries of origin:

- China (4)
- Japan (1)
- Kenya (1)
- Indonesia (1)
- Turkey (1)
- Mongolia (1)
- Vietnam (1)

Gender:

- Female (9)
- Male (1)

Levels of study:

- Undergraduates (2)
- Graduates (8)
 - Masters (4)
 - Doctorates (4)
- Number of years spent attending school in the U.S.
 - Between 0 and 2 (3)
 - Between 2 and 4 (3)
 - Over 4 years (4)
- Numbers of years spent attending Pitt
 - Between 0 and 2 (2)
 - Between 2 and 4 (5)
 - Over 4 years (3)

I chose not to include a categorical crosstabulation breakup of respondents to this study because the content of such a table may reveal clues about who the participants are. In this relatively close-knit “community”, the fact of stating the number of students from a specific country, of a certain gender, studying at a certain level would practically amount to disclosing who they are without merely muttering their names. Providing tangential but retraceable details on participating students can potentially ruin my painstaking efforts to conceal the identity of each participant.

3.6 Data Collection

I interviewed participants in person and face-to-face in a venue of their choice, mostly on the Pitt campus in a quiet environment for uninterrupted verbal exchanges and recording. Face-to-face interviews usually call for the respondent's full attention, which can enhance the quality and the reliability of the overall data collection process (Wengraf, 2001).

I used a Sony ICD-PX470 digital voice recorder with Built-In USB to record each interview. Recorded information was anonymous. No respondent's identifiers or codes that could potentially be used to re-identify individuals has been recorded. I did not record any sensitive information that could potentially harm an individual's reputation, employment or financial status, nor did I record any information likely to expose them to legal jeopardy. Each interview was saved as an MP3 sound file under the file name "Respondent" followed by the number representing the order in which the respondent is interviewed and the date and time of the interview. Files were completely anonymous. For example, the file name for the first respondent if interviewed April 29, 2019, is "Respondent1_42919".

3.7 Interview Protocol

I administered an in-depth semi-structured formal interview. For this study, I created a list of guiding themes and question items (see Appendix J). Upon meeting with each respondent, I presented them with a consent form (Wengraf, 2001) (see Appendix L). I verbally restated the main purpose of the study to the respondent out loud prior to reading the interview themes and questions. I followed a checklist of all the topics and interview items. I follow the order of topics

when going through the guiding topic list and interview items. I read each guiding theme to the respondent before asking him/her to state or comment on their perception or satisfaction/dissatisfaction towards each theme. I asked follow-up questions whenever applicable and asked the respondent to elaborate on a subtopic or interview item if necessary. I concluded the interview when all topics had been discussed. I asked the respondent if they wanted to add anything to the statements they had made during the interview. At that point, I thanked the respondent for their time and concluded the interview (Appendix M).

3.8 Anonymization and De-identification

Throughout the study and after it was completed, I set the conditions upstream for proper anonymization and de-identification. As specified in previous sections and for the sake of privacy protection, I did not collect any participant's identifiers prior to or during the recorded interview and I removed potentially identifiable personal information from the recording (anonymization). I made sure that no identifiers are directly or indirectly recognizable when listening to the saved audio files by deleting or masking personal and quasi-identifiers (Silverman, 2016).

3.9 Trustworthiness

This study is supervised, overviewed and previewed by a committee of advisors who are ensuring scholarliness of content and soundness of process. The dissertation committee is made up of a lead research advisor, a Pitt faculty member, and a practitioner. Furthermore, I relied on

peer practitioners and selected Pitt Educational Doctorate alumni for constructive pointed challenges, ongoing feedback and for overall review and editing. I firmly agree with Patton (2005) that soliciting and incorporating input from peers is key to shaping and consolidating the trustworthiness of qualitative research. But ultimately, I believe that the rigor of this inquiry and its trustworthiness rest upon my deep understanding of my role as a researcher and on the professional guardrails and strategies that I am employing throughout this process. I share the views of Morse et al. (2002) that scholars involved in qualitative research are chiefly accountable for the reliability of their work and they should not shy away from setting self-correcting embedded verification mechanisms as part of their inquiry.

4.0 Data Analysis and Results

The first section of this chapter explains the data collection protocol and the data analysis process. The second section presents the results of my research.

4.1 Data Analysis Process

I used Giorgi's inductive four-step phenomenological analysis coupled with a thematic content analysis.

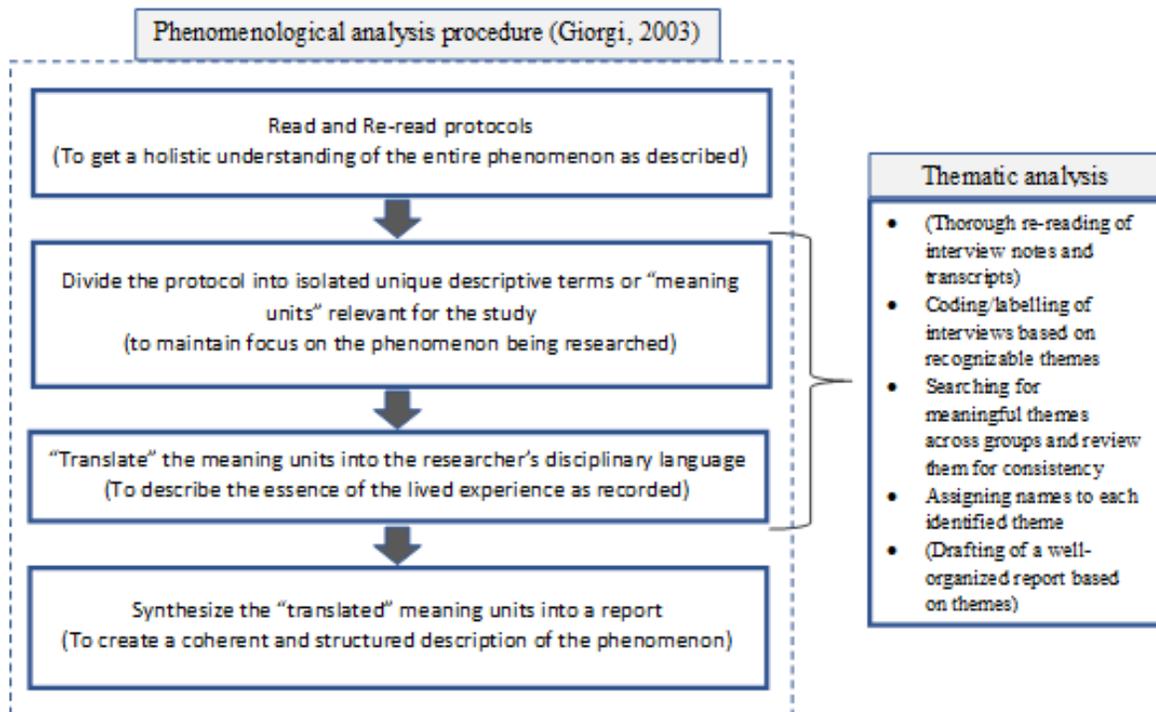


Figure 4. Adjusted Giorgi's four-step procedure to phenomenological data analysis incorporating qualitative thematic analysis

Through thematic analysis, I was able to divide the protocol into isolated “meaning units” and to “translate” those meaning units into education management terms. Thematic content analyses consist of categorizing qualitative data in order to yield pattern-filled data and recognizable or useable themes (Cohen, 2002). When performing thematic analyses, the researcher seeks to find commonalities across a dataset by first, intently reading interview notes or audio recording transcripts, and secondly by coding (labeling) the entire interview transcript based on recognizable themes. Cohen et al. (2002) state that coding is the process of grouping similar pieces of data in homogenous or nearly homogenous data subset/categories to make the subsequent analysis easier. Maxwell (2008) distinguishes between theoretical/substantive and organizational categories. While theoretical and/or substantive categories set the coded data in a preexisting theory or a conceptual framework, organizational categories are pre-identified subject matters or issues which the researcher determined prior to administering interviews (Maxwell, 2008). Thirdly, researchers look for meaningful themes across groups and review them for consistency. Fourthly, thematic analysts assign names to each identified theme and finally draft a well-organized report based on those themes. Final reports typically incorporate illustrative statements made by interviewees.

My choice to utilize Giorgi’s phenomenological analysis was justified because, as a procedure for descriptive qualitative data analysis, it helped outline the features or “meaning units” of a phenomenon as described by the participant (Giorgi, 2003). This research aimed to describe how international students perceive the services they receive from the University of Pittsburgh and the support systems delivering them, in their own words and from their unique perspective. Phenomenological analysis allowed me to delve into international students’ perceptions inductively, that is, without any pre-drawn conclusions.

I applied thematic analysis when it came to dividing the protocol into isolated “meaning units” and to “translating” those meaning units into education management terms.

In the context of this inquiry, I reasonably anticipated that the themes emerging from coding interviews map out international students’ experiences. More specifically, I anticipated that those emerging themes outline international students’ perceptions, and levels of satisfaction with support services.

4.2 Results

This section describes the findings yielded by my data gathering. The qualitative data was made up of 10 international students’ interviews. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were recorded using a Sony ICD-PX470 digital voice recorder. Interviews were transcribed using REV professional transcription services. The qualitative data were analyzed using Giorgi’s four-step procedure to phenomenological data analysis incorporating qualitative thematic analysis (Giorgi, 2003). The main purpose of the thematic analysis utilized in this research was to firstly, help identify and isolate “meaning units” and secondly, group those units into coherent themes using color coding.

Through intent reading and rereading of all 10 interview transcripts, I was able to spot common responses as well as unique ones or outliers. As I was rereading through the interview transcripts for the second, third or fourth time, I began highlighting --in other words, manually color coding, each group of words, each sentence, each set of sentences/paragraphs that convey similar ideas. In so doing, I made sure that each color corresponds to analogous ideas or denotations. In the analysis of the qualitative data sources, I identified 32 codes. Codes were then

grouped under nine themes. The action of color-coding each distinct response across all 10 interview transcripts gave a visual representation of the diversity of responses as on a painter's palette. It further made grouping similar meaning units under a theme much easier. Color coding clearly showed that many ideas and themes are recurring or shared across transcripts, it shows patterns emerging across interview transcripts. The themes were: (a) student's prior expectations; (b) student's lived experiences compared to their prior expectations; (c) Description of academic support services – faculty/advisors interactions with international students; (d) Description of academic support services – International students' lived experiences of English language support services; (e) Description of nonacademic support services – International students' lived experiences of immigration and visa support services ; (f) Description of nonacademic support services – International students' lived experiences of counseling and medical services; (g) Description of nonacademic support services – International students' lived experiences of intercultural support services; (h) Description of classroom environment, university facilities, and Pitt campus infrastructure as they enhance/undermine international student's experience; (i) Description of international student perception of being accepted, respected, understood and sense of belonging. As this color coding and grouping exercise was carried out, it seemed as if overarching themes literally “emerged” off of the pages of the interview transcripts, colorfully and progressively. The following pages present the 9 themes emerging from the data analysis of all 10 semi-directive interviews.

4.2.1 Emerging Theme # 1: Student's Prior Expectations

Question: What were your prior expectations regarding the types of academic and nonacademic support you would receive once at Pitt?

- **Respondent 2 stated**, “I thought I would be graduating faster, which apparently did not happen... I did my master in classroom teaching in my country in South East Asia ... I thought, I would work like the way I did my master ... everything was fast. But apparently it is not.”
- **Respondent 4 stated**, “I didn't think much about that before I came...I didn't have expectations on getting support from advisors.”
- **Respondent 8 stated**, “I think my expectation on the academic field is to get intensive and comprehensive research method studies here. That's one of my major goals to study here ...that's related to my previous experience because I got my Master's degree in the U.S...”
- **Respondent 7 stated**, “my expectation when I applied for Pitt is more on the contents like the getting intensive research methodology studies”
- **Respondent 10 stated**, “my expectation is that they (Office of International Services) have a high efficiency to process our paperwork and if we need to have their signature, they can give us in a short period of time and we don't have to wait for a long time to make appointments and to talk with them.”
- **Respondent 1 stated**, “So, I think that's my expectation and I was ... to read a lot and write a lot because that's what those foreign professors' classes looked like back in college.
- **Respondent 9 stated**, “... And then the other thing is about interaction with professors. Somehow, I was having this impression that students and professors in the U.S. they tend to have more formal or informal interaction. More like friends or equal partners in this academic marathon sort of thing... And informally, I was also hoping to have some like outside class, outside academics we have more informal interactions during holidays we can go to the professor's house, join their family to celebrate the cultural festivals and things in the U.S. That's kind of my dream sort of coming to Pitt.”

4.2.2 Emerging Theme # 2: Student's Lived Experiences Compared to Their Prior Expectations

Question: How would you characterize your lived Pitt experiences and compare them to your prior expectations?

- **Respondent 9 stated,** “A little bit below expectations.”
- **Respondent 2 stated,** “I expect ... the services help me to find a place to live and ...social network including the casual event that I can get involved in. If I compare to the Boston College, I think that Boston College was much better because they have off campus housing office. At Pitt, I tried to figure out and they don't have that. Maybe they have the other services, helpful, but it's very hard for me... I depend and rely on my peer, the student before me, rather than on an official office.”
- **Respondent 10 stated,** “I think they (OIS) met my expectations because for the orientation when I first came ... they organize orientation and taught us how to keep your legal status and how to get ... travel signature when you want to go back to your home country.”
- **Respondent 5 stated,** “I thought that there would probably be some support services, especially for international students. But in terms of reality, I did not see any kind of support from particularly my department by addressing the concerns of international students.”
- **Respondent 6 stated,** “It's different.”
- **Respondent 8 stated,** “I think it matched my expectation because when I enrolled and I know that I need to take four required methodology courses, both qualitative and quantitative and I think Pitt is better than other universities because I have my friends who enrolled in other universities, also a doctorate program, her university doesn't have the requirements to take

quantitative courses and our program required both qualitative and quantitative, no matter what kind of research you're going to do in the future, but you have to have certain training on both methods.”

4.2.3 Emerging Theme # 3: Description of Academic Support Services – Faculty/Advisors Interactions with International Students

- **Respondent 6 stated**, “they're very helpful, very kind and very responsive. I do not have any comment on that, just positive comments about their attitudes to work with graduate students, including me...Yeah, in general, knowledgeable, experiences, although very few faculty members and just a couple of the staff, sometimes I think that maybe they don't have enough experience or not enough knowledge to provide as good information on as I expected. In general, it's good.”
- **Respondent 3 stated**, “For faculty members, some of the faculty members I am not satisfied... but it's just the minority. Majority, most of them is good in their profession... They're very serious in doing the job and also give the interest and also, they pay attention to the student's demand, from me, in general, it's good...very few professors give the detailed feedback and recommendation. Most of them give the very general, especially for the final assignment or final project. I expect they will do further than that.”
- **Respondent 7 stated**, “Overall, I'm satisfied. With the performance of the staff and also the knowledge and profession and wisdom of the faculty members, generally.”
- **Respondent 1 stated**, “my advisor always encouraged me: don't be shy, everyone can understand you. You can just share your ideas in the class.”

- **Respondent 4 stated**, “I think, in general, faculty members at the school are very empathetic and very sympathetic toward international students. I think they recognize the difference, the unique needs that international students have, and also the unique contributions that they bring as well. In general, I think they were very supportive of my process of learning and going through the PhD program”
- **Respondent 7 stated**, “there are some areas that I was disappointed and there are some areas that I was happy about... relationship within the classroom with the professors and the professor's attitude towards the students were beyond my expectations... And they were also treating me as one of the valued members of the class...”
- **Respondent 9 stated**, “... the relationship with academic advisor was not good because he's a young scholar. He's a very young scholar.”
- **Respondent 8 stated**, “But my complaint was about what I studied was good for my mentality because I was satisfied to study those things but it wasn't good for the market reality. So, I complain about my advisor, not because he was giving me the freedom but he was not telling me the results of my freedoms actually.”
- **Respondent 2 stated**, “... Some are very supportive, but sometimes you don't really know who you should go to when you have questions. It's not very clear in the department who we should look for when we have questions. Yeah. And some are very supportive but some ... for example, my plan of study was lost and I still don't know why.”

4.2.4 Emerging Theme # 4: Description of Academic Support Services – International Students’ Lived Experiences of English Language Support Services

- **Respondent 4 stated**, “they helped matched me with an English native speaker culture...”

- **Respondent 8 stated**, “So I was a very late learner of English so I had lots of problems. And in terms of mentality, I had also some limitations. Hey, am I going to do it well? So how are people going to think about myself ... But when I was accepted to the program and nobody addressed my language concerns but ...one or two faculty members who just graded my writings or read my writings and let me know I need to get some editorial help from the library or any other services.”
- **Respondent 2 stated**, “all the international student who come to Pitt, if their TOEFL score is below 100, they need to attend a test. After the test, my advisor encouraged me to took the English class, so I took the listening and speaking class in the first semester.”
- **Respondent 5 stated**, “the library gives us a lot of opportunities to do the free editing, and I know a lot of my other counterparts and my other international friends, they use that a lot, take that opportunity a lot to go to the writing center to edit their paper, so, English support is good.”
- **Respondent 1 stated**, “I really appreciate all the activities the library offers to the graduate students especially for international students. They gave very good resources for literary review, and also support. For example, using ...Mendeley, they provided very regularly the training workshop...”

4.2.5 Emerging Theme # 5: Description of Nonacademic Support Services – International Students’ Lived Experiences of Immigration and Visa Support Services

- **Respondent 10 stated**, “all legal documents were arranged and planned out by the international offices exactly as I thought.”
- **Respondent 6 stated**, “sometimes, I will receive the email from the OIS office or international student office.”

- **Respondent 2 stated**, “So many of my problems were resolved timely ... The international office, for example, was very helpful about those. My school of education was very helpful.”
- **Respondent 2 stated**, “They are very friendly.”
- **Respondent 7 stated**, “In terms of responsiveness, like again, international student office is really the office that provided all the information I needed in terms of the legal information, how to maintain my visa status, the information I needed, extension of documents, signatures. They are extremely responsive. Very, very responsible. Very professional. I was very impressed by that office.”

4.2.6 Emerging Theme # 6: Description of Nonacademic Support Services – International Students’ Lived experiences of Counseling and Medical Services

- **Respondent 2 stated** “I think for example in the School of Education, there are many, many Chinese students... and they are always crowded and they help each other in many ways. I think they are supporting each other. And American student, because of PhD program, most of them have family.”
- **Respondent 10 stated** “I think the health and counseling service is accessible because I know there are some office, they deal with this. If you feel, you know, you have mental, mental disease where you feel any uncomfortable feelings, you can talk with. I know there's an office. And I know there are another office to help you. Like, for example, when I got the training for the sex harassment, you know, I know that there's the office that you can go to. But I hadn't got the chance to talk with any counseling office or counselors. No, I don't. I know there are, but I just didn't got the chance to go.”

- **Respondent 2 stated** “I wish somebody told me that it was available when I started the program, but nobody did. I didn't know anything about it until, I think it was my fifth year. I was going through some really hard time, and a friend of mine noticed that I was going through hard time, and she said that, I go to this counseling, you should check it out. Maybe you should go. That's how I learned that there was this service available. Then I believe I went online, and I signed up for an appointment, and then I showed up. When I showed up, I sit there like it's like a big doctor's office where people come and wait your turn. I was waiting, and waiting, and waiting. Finally, it was my turn, and then I talked to somebody for a very brief time, and it wasn't satisfactory at all. Maybe it was just one that particular instance where the person that I met wasn't really matching my needs, or it wasn't meeting my expectations.”

4.2.7 Emerging Theme # 7: Description of Nonacademic Support Services – International Students’ Lived Experiences of Intercultural Support Services

- **Respondent 2 stated** “PhD student and also live here for several years. I didn't actively look for such kind of program. I just, you know, I just take my courses and go back to home. So, I don't know if they have certain kinds of programs, I'm not sure.”
- **Respondent 6 stated** “in our class, my professor always brings some flyer about activity flyers. They share it with us and they said, "You can attend these activities." That activity is not only hold by the school and also some like that.”
- **Respondent 3 stated** “Because I took a course named cross cultural communication, and that course, they ask you to find a conversation partner.”
- **Respondent 6 stated** “I think there are a lot of places that we can go if we want to attend some events or symposium or lectures because they have MyPitt portal, you know the webpage,

there's a section listing all the coming events. And this is a place that I go. And I know also Pitt have the newspaper, online newspaper, and although I didn't see the newspaper a lot.”

4.2.8 Emerging Theme # 8: Description of Classroom Environment, University Facilities, and Pitt Campus Infrastructure as They Enhance/Undermine International Student’s Experience

- **Respondent 2 stated** “It's standard for American universities, I guess. The libraries, the printing services, the classroom facilities or outside classroom facilities are good. I don't have any complaint, except the office space.”
- **Respondent 6 stated** “I think it's very good. I mean, the study area is very, very... It can fit my requirement. Whenever I want to study, I can find a place in here or in the Hillman Library. And I think the printer is very convenient.”
- **Respondent 1 stated** “I think it's very good. I mean, the study area is very, very... It can fit my requirement. Whenever I want to study, I can find a place in here or in the Hillman Library. And I think the printer is very convenient.”

4.2.9 Emerging Theme # 9: Description of International Student Perception of Being Accepted, Respected, Understood and Sense of Belonging

- **Respondent 2 stated** “So, for example, there were moments during the presidential election or after that, with Trump, and then with the racist group, hate group and everything. Those time made me feel like, do really people think immigrants, international students, and I was wearing headscarf also, do they really see me as what people has been trolling on the social

media? You know, feeling like that, and apparently it was not just me personally, but most international students, even the Chinese. Even though so many Chinese in the U.S., and they still feel insecure also during those times.”

- **Respondent 5 stated** “Sometimes I’m comfortable, sometimes I’m not. I would just go by common sense. If I have a dissenting opinion and if I knew or if I felt that it might offend some people, then either I didn’t say it or either I choose, I’ll formulate the sentence in such a way so that it was less dissenting or less opinionated or less offending people.”
- **Respondent 6 stated** “Freedom is the most important thing and I experience here. I can express whatever I want to say here and, you know, freely, because compared to the immense fear in my country, very restricted. Very, very restricted. So here in the U.S. I can express whatever I want to say.”
- **Respondent 10 stated** “In Asia, like in my home country, it’s a very mono party politics over there, like communists in politics. It’s very coercive ...even the government and the politicians have very strong influence on academics. When I’m here, I really appreciate the way the people express their ideas, they are respected. Maybe there’s two sides to a coin, but in general, I really enjoy the way ... I could express my ideas in terms of the academics, even nonacademic affairs. That’s why I say I’m very satisfied with the atmosphere here.”
- **Respondent 3 stated** “I feel very, very uncomfortable. But it’s not by a professor, that’s by students.”

4.3 Results as They Relate to the Research Questions

This section presents my findings as they address the research questions. The goals of my research were, first, to examine how international students, at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education, perceive the services they receive and the support systems delivering them, and second, to contrast those perceptions against international students' own prior expectations.

The main **research questions** were as follows:

1. What were international students' expectations prior to enrolling at the University of Pittsburgh?
2. How do international students perceive the quality of student support services at the University of Pittsburgh?
3. What is the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction expressed by international students towards student support services at the University of Pittsburgh?

These data were based on interviews of international students from such countries as China, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan, and Kenya.

The data analysis revealed the following:

Research question 1: What were international students' expectations prior to enrolling at the University of Pittsburgh?

Evidence: the analysis of the data gathered through semi-directive interviews showed that most respondents had clear expectations of receiving comprehensive, in-depth quality instructional content, hands-on academic guidance, and theory as well as practice in research methodologies. They expected to experience very efficient administrative support services from the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. Some anticipated extensive readings in a fast-paced environment.

Many conceded that their prior expectations partly stemmed from their own experiences in another American university before considering applying for Pitt, from their informal knowledge of graduate/doctoral studies in the U.S., or from hearsay. Others expected to study in a quasi-utopia where student-teacher interactions would be very informal and would extend beyond the confines of the classroom to families and external cultural events. A few respondents, however, had no prior expectations regarding the type or the quality of academic and nonacademic support services they would receive as international students once at the University of Pittsburgh.

This result aligns with the work of McMahon (1992) as well as with Mazzarol and Soutar's (2002) in that students' prior expectations are based on such factors as their formal and informal knowledge of the host country. That knowledge comes from recommendations made by acquaintances, estimated financial costs, perceived social costs, perceived quality and reputation of the potential host institution, the perceived quality of the target university's staff and management, the target institution's alumni base and vitality, as well as current and past international student population. By setting well-articulated academic and nonacademic expectations, students anticipate specific outcomes out of their graduate student experiences. Their perceived satisfaction or dissatisfaction vis-à-vis Pitt support services, depends on how highly and how firmly those expectations were held.

Research question 2: How do international students perceive the quality of student support services at the University of Pittsburgh?

Evidence: the data analysis revealed very mixed levels of perception of service quality. Service quality varies depending on the type of support services received and on the personal experiences of each individual student. For example, visa support services provided by the university's Office of International Student (OIS) were perceived as adequate, efficient and timely,

whereas housing support and intercultural outreach (also provided by OIS) , as well as counselling services to be deficient or outright inadequate. While most respondents experienced respectful, competent, and somewhat nurturing interactions with their professors and advisors, some described receiving minimal feedback on their work and decried the inexistence of career guidance services especially at the doctoral level. The data did not tell whether international students were the only students experiencing low quality support in career advising services, intercultural outreach, and counselling or if that perception of low-quality support was also experienced by American and noncitizen resident students. Further research may be needed to compare perceived service quality across student populations irrespective of citizenship or legal status. Many doctoral students stated that their first 18 to 24 months on campus were the ones during which they experienced deep feelings of inadequacy, homesickness, and inability to effectively communicate in English (understanding others and being understood by others), and a difficult adjustment to a new/different university culture. They identified those first couple of years as times when they felt the most vulnerable or the most at risk of dropping out.

Overall, this result comports with Andrade's (2009) work on strengthening international students in that it shows that the respondents seem to have a clear understanding of the various factors influencing their academic and overall success. Many interviewees "took matters in their own hands" whenever university support services were lacking or deficient by creating new avenues and by expanding their network of contacts beyond the classroom or beyond the School of Education. International students displayed great resourcefulness every time university support services turned out to be weak, non-adapted or insufficient. This is illustrated by the fact that students from the same country tend to organically clutter together, share tips with one another and create support systems that are, in many respects, complementary or even superior to

established university support services. This research showed that students from countries with a strong presence at Pitt or the School of Education tended to benefit from the proactive support of a preexisting community and from informal resources within that community. For example, many Chinese students expressed the view that they received a significant portion of their information about academic and nonacademic support from fellow countrymen and women who attend or used to attend the School of Education. From the time they set foot on campus (some times before) to the time they graduate, many Chinese students stated that they were given access to readily available resources and tips coming from within the “community” in order to help them avoid pitfalls and lessen a potential sense of being out of place.

Research question 3: What is the level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction expressed by international students toward student support services at the University of Pittsburgh?

Evidence: The data analysis revealed that most respondents were overall satisfied with the academic and nonacademic support services received from the university of Pittsburgh and from the School of Education. More specifically, they were very satisfied with such academic support as English language, library and academic writing assistance services, academic content, and visa paperwork assistance. Some, albeit a minority, were bluntly dissatisfied with the academic and career advising as well as with cultural immersion, intercultural connection facilitation, and with counselling (or lack thereof) aimed at international students.

This research was unable to clearly capture the views of international students who were indifferent, not sufficiently aware of, or had not experienced certain student support services.

5.0 Discussion

The purpose of this research was to record and analyze international students' perception of university support services in their own words from their own perspectives. It was also to contrast students' prior expectations to their perception of the recent or current support services they have experienced as international students at Pitt. It was not an attempt to formally assess the institutional performance of the University of Pittsburgh toward international students or to evaluate the School of Education's support service delivery system.

5.1 Student's Expectations and Perceptions of Service Quality

The results of this research aligned with SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1988) precepts. As stated in the literature review of this dissertation, SERVQUAL defines perceived Service Quality (SQ) as the difference (or the gap) between the individual's perceptions of given service delivery (P: Perceived Service) and the individual's expectations of a given service delivery (E: Expected Service).

$$(SQ) = P - E.$$

On the one hand, when customers' expectations (E) are higher than their perceptions of the services they received, Service Quality (SQ) is said to be low. On the other hand, when the customers' perceptions of the service they received (P) is greater than their prior expectations (E), the is said to be high. When SQ equals zero, the delivered services meet costumers' expectations.

When SQ is inferior to zero, the perceived quality of the delivered services falls short of expectations (Parasuraman et al., 1988). If Expected Service (E) is equal or close to zero, le Perceived Service Quality (SQ) is equal to the Perceived Service (P).

It is notable that throughout this research, international students with little or no prior expectations to receive quality academic support services were less likely to express feelings of dissatisfaction after attending Pitt for a few years and inversely.

For example, when asked what their expectations regarding academic support prior to coming to the School of Education were, respondent 4 stated that they “did not think about it [expectation]” before coming to Pittsburgh. When asked, a second time, if they had any prior expectations, they just replied “No”. When further asked to assess their overall experience of university support services, they stated “Yes, I'm a very satisfied”.

International students who expressed the highest levels of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) were found among those with the high prior expectations of support services. In other words, the higher the expectation the stronger the satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the perceived quality of a specific service. For example, prior to coming to Pitt, respondent 1 was expecting to benefit tremendously from their interaction with their academic advisors as they perceived the quality of that interaction as central to their success in the American higher education system. Reality exceeded their expectation in that regard. This is illustrated as follows:

- Respondent 1 had high expectations regarding the quality of the professor-student classroom interactions. They stated “I knew that there are many platforms and opportunities that I can benefit from this education system. So, it would be, for example, advisors. So, I knew that advisors were important in American higher education system,

and I thought my relationship with my advisor would help me to improve my academic skills within the process.”

- Respondent 1 expressed high level of satisfaction about the actual professor-student classroom interactions. They stated, for example “relationship within the classroom with the professors and the professors’ attitude towards the students were beyond my expectations. So, they were very nice. They were very open and they were very inclusive [...] And they were also treating me as one of the valued members of the class.”

5.2 The Determinants of Educational Service Quality

When I was designing the interview guiding questions for this research, my main topics of discussion were directly inspired by the 4 key determinants of service quality in the higher education sector as outlined in HedPerf (Abdullah, 2005). As discussed in the literature review, HedPerf’s 4 key determinants of higher education service quality are namely: (1) academic university services, (2) nonacademic university services, (3) reliability of university services, (4) empathy expressed through university services. The use of those determinants allowed me to cover, during the interviews, the full array of support services delivered to students. The results of this research help underscore the relevance of HedPerf’s 4 key determinants to assessing students’ higher education experience. This research, because of the depth and the diversity of the data gathered from respondents, represented an eloquent empirical test of the HedPerf 4 key determinants of service quality in higher education. Furthermore, structuring my guiding questions around those 4 determinants helped me better delve into how international students experience support services, it made the interview process much smoother. Regrettably, this research is just

one in a handful of studies using HedPerf 4 determinants of service quality to probe students' assessment of the services they receive from their host universities. HedPerf cannot be reduced to its 4 determinants of service quality. Given my very narrow usage of one of HedPerf's many features, I acknowledge that it would be very premature to make sweeping conclusions regarding the broader efficacy of HedPerf in understanding students. Further research may be needed.

5.3 Acculturative Stress: The Importance of the First Few Months

This study showed that most respondents view their first few months or semesters at Pitt as crucial to their overall long-term academic and nonacademic success. Many cited their lack of proficiency in the American English language, their unfamiliarity with American cultural cues, and the lack of institutional support as impediments to their quick adjustment to their new environment. During their, almost unavoidable, adjustment period, newcomers were vulnerable to feelings of uneasiness, isolation, and of perceived or actual rejection. This finding seems to match a phenomenon usually described in the literature as acculturative stress: the psychological hardship experienced by students who struggle to adjust to their new academic and nonacademic culture (Pedersen, 1991). For example, one of the compounded effects of acculturative stress in students who do not receive adequate housing support services from Pitt is that they would turn to fellow students and faculty/advisors for tips on housing, in desperation. This is illustrated by respondent 7's statement when describing their early housing search "When I came to Pittsburgh, it's really hard for me. I contacted everywhere, especially my academic advisor, and he introduced me to this student who had come before me [...] Mainly, I got the support from my peer." During their first few months at Pitt, international students face multiple challenges that extend far beyond

academics. The lack of proper institutional support during those formative months may push them down a spiral of loneliness, anxiety, mental inadequacy, and low academic performance. This study helped emphasize the importance of a comprehensive support system, early on, in setting students on the path to success. For example, respondents 4 and 10 attributed the success of their adjustment to getting paired up with native English speakers or to volunteering or working on campus within months of their arrival. When asked if they attribute the positive change in their university experience to their volunteering/working at Pitt, respondent 10 stated “Yeah, yeah, always. [...] the first two years, I was not involved in administrative work, so I have always got the same experience [...]”.

5.4 Support Services Provided by OIS – Multiple levels of Perception

The Office of International Services (OIS) at Pitt prides itself on being the university’s immigration paperwork processing “arm”. In reality, OIS has two functions. The first one is to assist international students, scholars, staff, and faculty navigate through visa and legal status questions. This function is directly derived from a federal mandate requiring that all international student-accepting universities maintain certified Designated School Officers (DSO) on staff. The DSO’s role is to keep track of international students’ legal status through the Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) and to communicate regularly with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS)¹⁶ on student visa and immigration issues. OIS derives its core modus operandi from federal laws and from the Department of Homeland Security’s regulations. Since

¹⁶ <https://studyinthestates.dhs.gov/designated-school-official>

this function originates from a federal mandate, OIS has no leeway (or choice) when carrying it out but to fully comply with it. OIS follows strict guidelines handed from the top down.

OIS's other function is to make sure that international students feel welcome to campus. The concept of "making sure international students are or feel welcome" is nowhere plainly defined. It is, however, widely understood as a strong commitment to helping international students and professionals smoothly sail through school, have a pleasant overall experience and be successful¹⁷. This latter function includes providing international students with mainly nonacademic support services. Those services are intended to make students feel embraced and accepted by the wider Pitt community and to create an environment conducive to success.

Are international students satisfied/dissatisfied with or ambivalent about OIS support services?

This study clearly showed that most respondents are satisfied (or very satisfied) with the quality of visa/legal status processing support services they received from OIS. The respondents unambiguously associated OIS with visa and immigration support services. They rated those services highly and very highly.

On the specific question of the assistance provided by OIS to help international students and professionals feel welcome and be successful, however, some respondents were satisfied, others were dissatisfied or ambivalent.

Among those who expressed dissatisfaction or were unsure, it is not clear if the respondents even associated OIS with any support services other than visa and immigration. Therefore, students' negative assessments of support services were primarily voiced toward the School of Education or the University system as a whole instead of getting directed against OIS.

¹⁷ OIS - Annual Report 2017

Based on the analysis of the data, OIS is widely perceived by its internal audience (international students) as a good executor of its visa and immigration function. OIS is almost never perceived as also being responsible for providing non-visa related services. What could explain this discrepancy in perception of the roles of OIS? That remains hard to determine as the dual role of OIS was not specifically addressed in the interview questions and probes. I can only speculate that OIS carries out its visa and immigration missions at a high level of satisfaction possibly because it is under strict federal mandate to do so. I can further speculate that if OIS were to deliver inadequate/subpar reporting to its external audience and mandator (the Federal Government), the University of Pittsburgh would incur rather costly consequences. The University of Pittsburgh and OIS cannot afford to dissatisfy its mandator. That reality could potentially explain why OIS is dedicated to delivering, upstream, prompt and accurate visa and immigration support services to its internal audience downstream. This dedication seems to partly stem from the requirement, upstream, to provide prompt and accurate reporting to its external audience.

5.5 Recommendations

5.5.1 Recommendations for OIS

This study has helped emphasize the crucial importance of the first few months in the speed of adjustment and the quality of international students' overall experience. At the University of Pittsburgh, the Office of International Services is in charge of handling tedious visa and work permit inquiries. OIS is also in charge of designing and implementing the institutional support targeted at international students. This study helped demonstrate how OIS has implemented, albeit

unequally, its two core functions. For example, it showed that OIS had not carried out its non-visa functions as robustly as it seems to have done for its visa and immigration responsibilities. According to Andrade and Evans (2009), U.S. universities must intentionally incorporate effective support of international students into their institutional strategic planning. I contend that effective support services must start early on in the student's experience, must be collaborative, and comprehensive. It must, additionally, aim at strengthening successful existing programs and proactively reaching out to underrepresented international students. I recommend that OIS implements a 3-step approach (ESA), in perfect coordination with the School of Education, as follows:

- Early interventions
- Strengthening existing programs
- Attention paid to underrepresented groups of international students

5.5.2 Recommendations for the School of Education and Roadmap for Implementation

This study showed that respondents who were dissatisfied with support services nearly always blamed the School of Education or the University system for the deficiencies in career support, housing, and counselling services... To many students, the School of Education seemed to have resigned its responsibilities to support international students proactively and consistently in the aforementioned areas. Some students have felt further isolated, some have ended up taken matters in their own hands, and other have relied on peers for advice and guidance. I recommend that the School of Education, in close coordination with OIS, leads the charge when it comes to designing and implementing intentional and timely support services. In a joint OIS-SoE effort, a sample of international students should be interviewed yearly to understand their nuanced

perceptions of support services. The findings yielded by this annual qualitative assessment should directly inform decision making. Understanding students' view in order to do better by them should be standard practice. Unfortunately, this is currently not the case. In the previous section, I recommended the implementation of ESA, a 3-step approach to addressing international students' specific needs. SoE should dedicate or reassign resources to make this plan a reality. ESA is detailed in the following section.

5.5.3 Proposed Deliverable: ESA

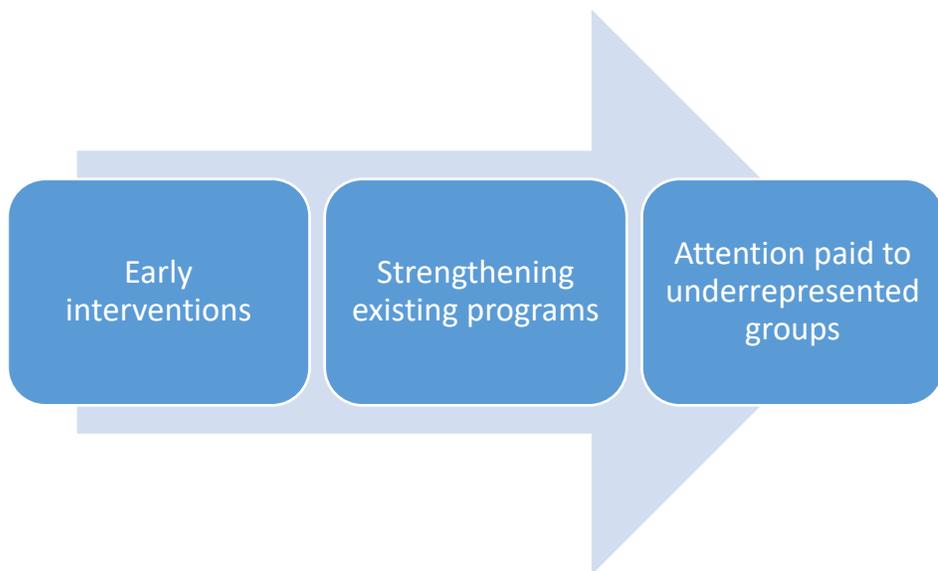


Figure 5. A 3-step approach to better supporting international students at the University of Pittsburgh's School of Education

5.5.3.1 Early Interventions

International students interviewed for this research stated that they are the most susceptible to do poorly in the first few months of arriving at Pitt, when they are isolated and when they don't necessarily have a good grasp of the English language or cultural cues. OIS should, with the help

of faculty and staff, intentionally reach out to international students as soon as they begin classes and advocate for co-curricular English conversation groups. In addition to their usual mission, OIS should set up and facilitate the pairing up of new English speakers with volunteer native speakers or with more advanced English speakers who could themselves be international students. Co-curriculum English conversation groups should not exceed 10 members and should meet at least once a week in a campus setting in order to discuss a predetermined topic. The goal of those discussion is to get members to know each other and know more about their respective cultures. Conversation groups should not exceed 60 minutes in duration and should occur in a non-threatening and non-demeaning two-way conversation format.

5.5.3.2 Strengthening Existing Programs

Since 2017, OIS has co-organized the Pitt to You Student Ambassadors program. Pitt to You Ambassadors is a program aimed at facilitating Chinese student's introduction to America and to acquaint a small group of incoming American students to Chinese culture and history through workshops and sightseeing. This effort is directed at Chinese students, the largest group of international students at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. Similar programs should be organized for students from such countries as the Republic Korea (South Korea) or Indonesia. The Pitt to You Student Ambassadors program should be expanded to include more Chinese and incoming American students, and more foreign countries as well.

Although none of the interviewees referenced or credited Pitt to You Ambassador for facilitating their transition to the American university, it is undeniable that building bridges between international students and Americans benefits both parties. I concur with Terano's (2008) assertion that student affairs professionals play a crucial role in encouraging and assisting with the social and cultural immersion of international graduate students by actively engaging in the

promotion of cross-cultural experiences throughout the student population regardless of citizenship or visa status (Terano, 2008).

5.5.3.3 Attention Paid to Underrepresented Groups of International Students

As evidenced in this research, students from well represented countries or world regions tend to naturally come together, share tips for success and to support each other emotionally. Underrepresented nationalities and religions, students from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, tend to look for a comparable type of support (usually for nonacademic support) outside of the School of Education or remain isolated. OIS should lead the effort to identify very early on and engage such potentially isolated students. They should do so with the discreet collaboration of classroom professors who could anonymously share information about students whom they think are isolated or may need specific language or emotional support.

5.6 Limitations, Validity and Blind Spots

This inquiry makes no claim of representativeness of the overall international student population and of their views. This inquiry in practice is limited to investigating the Pitt experiences and perceptions of a small number of current SoE international students. It therefore does not make any pretense as to its applicability to all SoE or Pitt international students.

One of its main limitations is the fact that, as a qualitative study, its findings and ensuing recommendations may not be extrapolated to the whole international student body or the university system at large. My goal is that the expected richness and depth of the findings help inform

practitioners on areas for improving the quality of the support services they offer, thus for improving their own practices and the university system as a consequence.

Another potential shortcoming could be that by solely focusing on probing international students' perceptions and level of satisfaction/dissatisfaction with support services, this inquiry does not attempt to deal with potential implications for academic success and graduation. Further research may be needed to explore those questions more deeply.

Also, by using the umbrella term “international student” this inquiry lumped together students with potentially very diverse backgrounds, aspirations and experiences; possibly students with more differences amongst themselves than with some of their American peers. Wang (2009) warns researchers against ignoring students’ cultural differences and specific academic needs. In so doing, this study may not have accounted for the students’ individual needs and may underestimate common traits or experiences that may be happening beyond such segregating criteria as citizenship and visa status.

6.0 Conclusion

Conclusions and implications of this research can be summarized as follows: international students view on the support service they receive at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education are positive even though some students expressed dissatisfaction with such areas of support as academic advising, cross-cultural connection, career guidance and counseling.

Self-reflective organizations and student-centered universities that are able to incorporate user/consumer feedback into their continuous improvement process, typically perform better in the long term than the ones that ignore or underestimate feedback (Brigham, 1993). In a similar way, sound and intentional support service systems and practices that are holistically dedicated to listening to international students can proactively contribute to the student's overall success (Hayes & Lin, 1994). Chaffee and Sherr (1992) argued that the institutional commitment to providing top-quality support services is just as pivotal to student success as it is to the success of the institution itself. Along with Chaffee and Sherr, I argue that institutions of higher education that lend a careful feedback-seeking ear to their principal constituencies and beneficiaries set themselves up for long-term success. I also argue that, if properly collected, students' feedback can empower colleges and universities to take appropriate corrective or reinforcing actions. It is, therefore, not trivial for educational organizations to seek to collect reactions and firsthand-experience narratives directly from the users in an unfiltered and systematic manner. I am convinced that, if successfully implemented, the approach and model used for this inquiry can positively inspire higher education practitioners and researchers alike when it comes to understanding and serving international students. I would like the findings of this study to encourage educational leaders and administrators to utilize more investigative methods that are likely to provide them with multifaceted perspectives

from within their organization. More precisely, I hope that this study would have provided a template for future research on student perception and satisfaction.

I argue that universities hosting international students should aim to establish solid foundations by exhibiting the institutional features and practices of “international-student centeredness.” It all begins by listening to them. I define “international-student centeredness” as the idea that questions relating to international students or international education should not be treated as “niche” or as separate concerns but rather as front-and-center to the way colleges and universities plan for the long haul and function daily.

Successful universities must have a culture of incorporating students’ voices, perspectives and feedback into the way they are run. In my view, it all begins by intently listening to them. As defined early in this study, “international-student centeredness” is the idea that matters regarding international students or outreach should be at the heart of long-term planning and daily operations. International-student centeredness rests upon the premise that the academic and nonacademic success of international students is also the success of the entire university. In other words, it is the idea that universities should define and adopt as organizational structure and processes that are purposefully and wholly dedicated to international students' holistic success. And in so doing, they would also ensure the success of every single student.

Appendix A International Student Enrollment Trends

Year	Enrolled Int'l Students	OPT	Total Int'l Students	Total U.S. Enrollment*	% Int'l	Annual % Change
2017/18	891,330	203,462	1,094,792	19,831,000	5.5	1.5
2016/17	903,127	175,695	1,078,822	20,185,000	5.3	3.4
2015/16	896,341	147,498	1,043,839	20,264,000	5.2	7.1
2014/15	854,639	120,287	974,926	20,300,000	4.8	10.0
2013/14	780,055	105,997	886,052	21,216,000	4.2	8.1
2012/13	724,725	94,919	819,644	21,253,000	3.9	7.2
2011/12	679,338	85,157	764,495	20,625,000	3.7	5.7
2010/11	647,246	76,031	723,277	20,550,000	3.5	4.7
2009/10	623,119	67,804	690,923	20,428,000	3.4	2.9
2008/09	605,015	66,601	671,616	19,103,000	3.5	7.7

Figure 6. International Student Enrollment Trends. Excerpt from Open Doors Report on International Exchange

Source: <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors>

Appendix B Top Ten Places of Origin of International Students

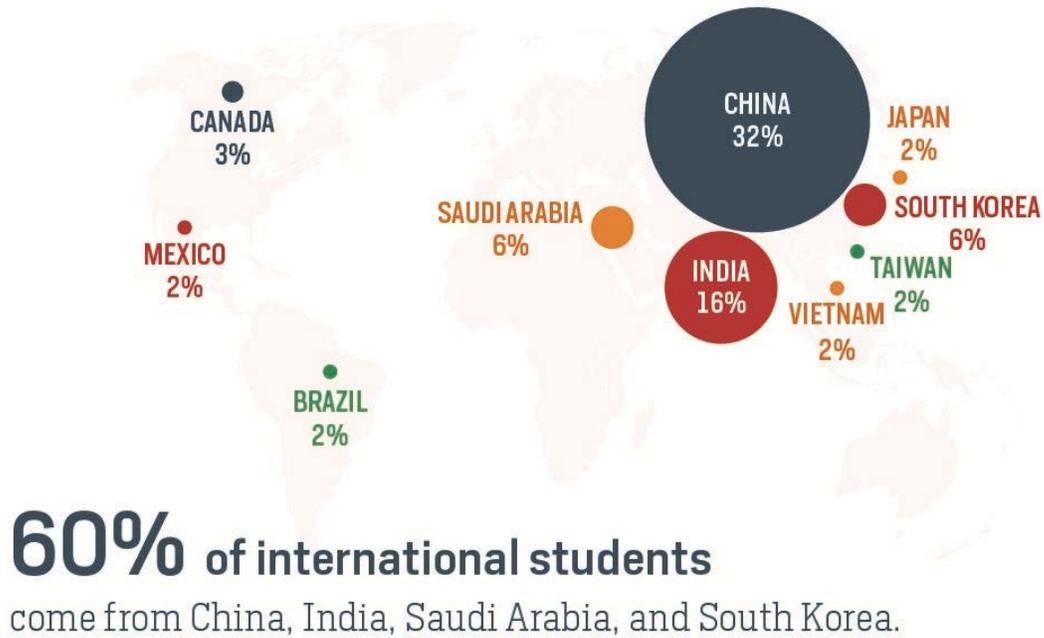


Figure 7. Top Ten Places of Origin of International Students. Excerpt from 2018 Open Doors Report on International Exchange

Source: <https://www.iie.org/Research-and-Insights/Open-Doors>

Appendix C General Statistics of International Students and Scholars at Pitt

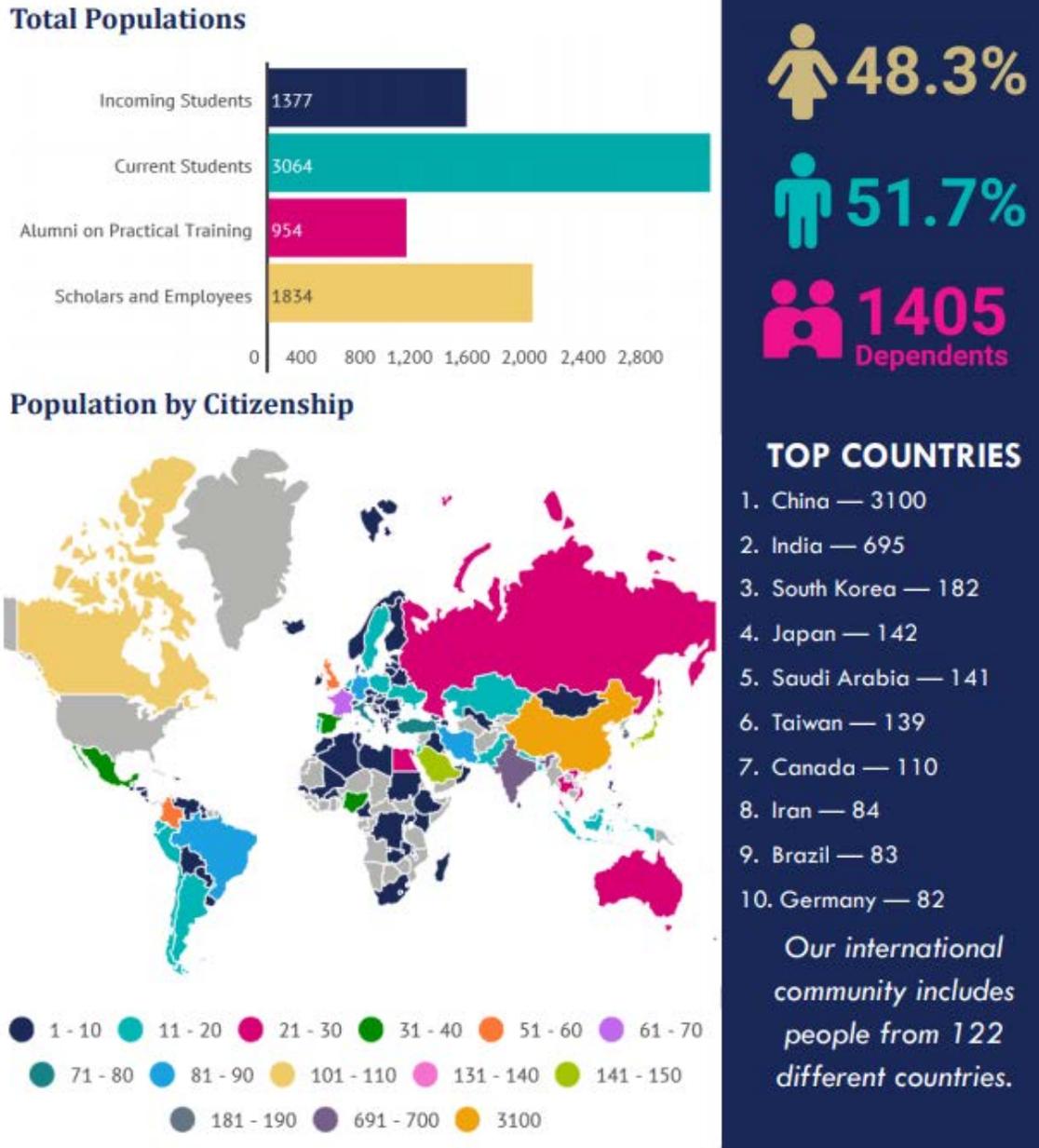


Figure 8. General Statistics of International Students and Scholars at the University of Pittsburgh

Source: Pitt Office of International Services 2017 Annual Report <https://www.ois.pitt.edu>

Appendix D The Educational and Life Transitions (ELT) Model

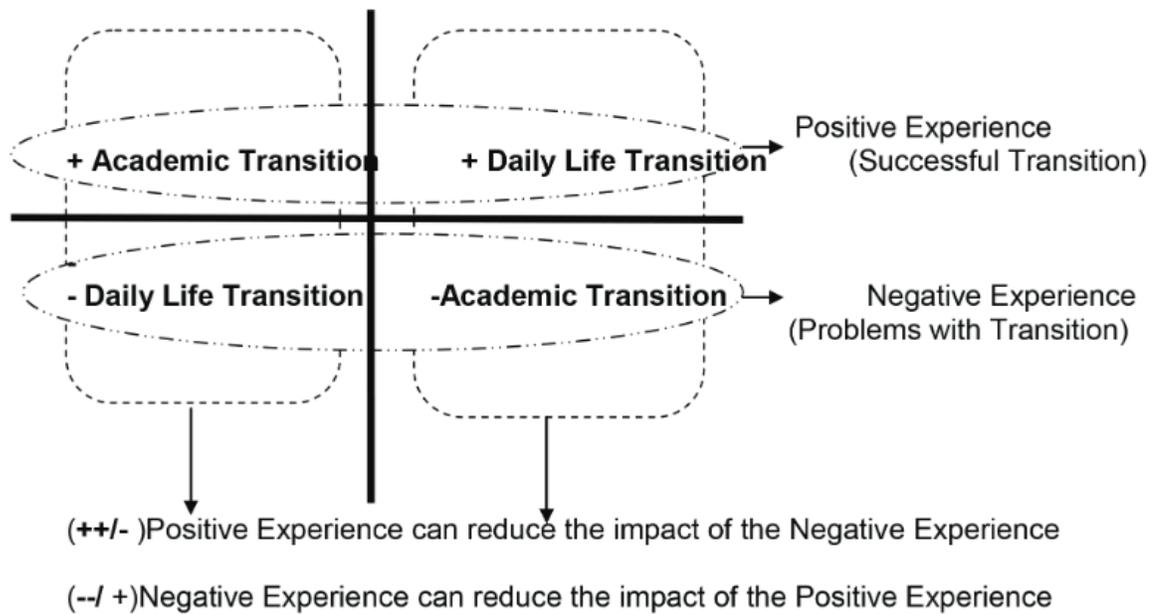


Figure 9. The Educational and Life Transitions (ELT) Model Depicting Relationship Between Academic and Daily Life Transitions of International Doctoral Students (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013)

Appendix E Conceptual Framework of Students' Aspirations and Expectations

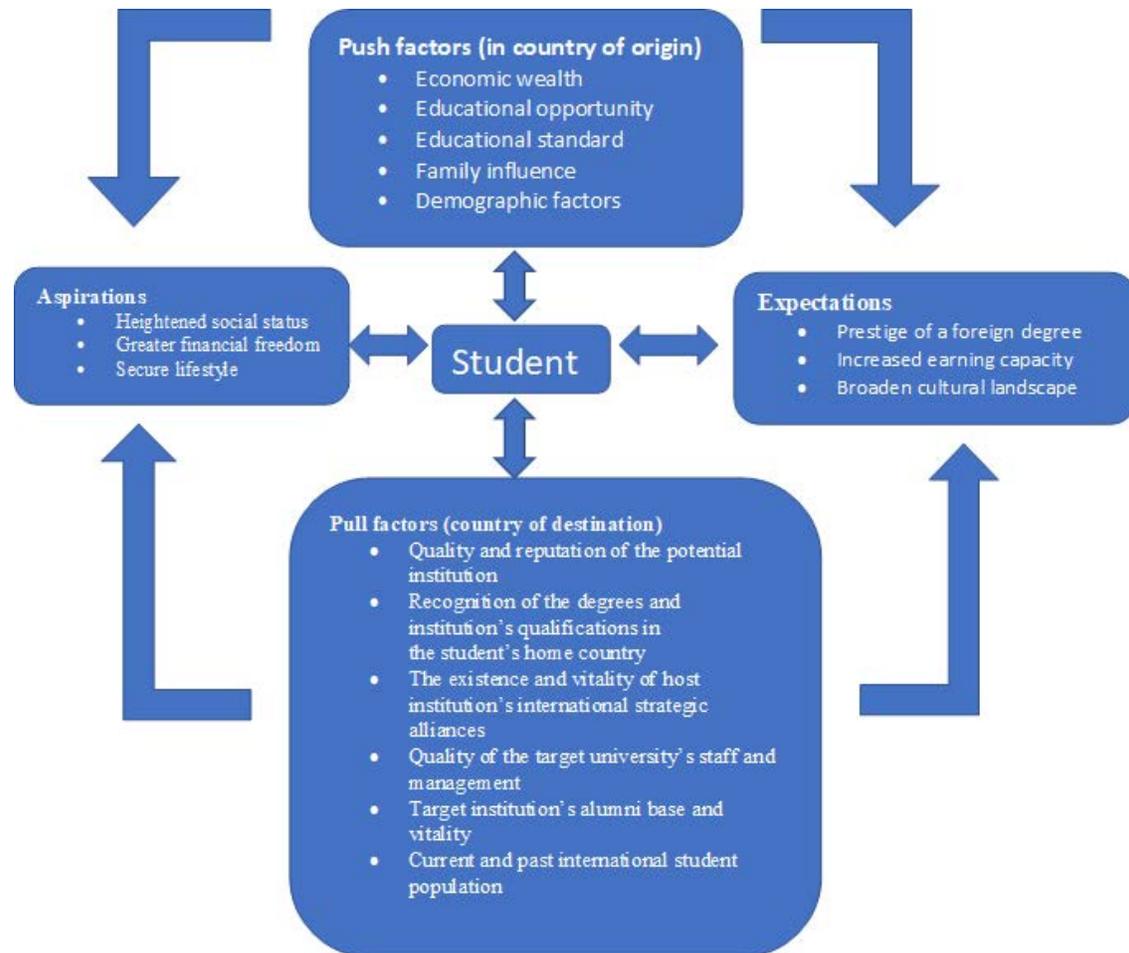


Figure 10. Conceptual framework of students' aspirations and expectations from international higher education

(Adapted from Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Azmat et al (2013))

Appendix F Original (41 items) and Adjusted HedPERF dimensions

Original HedPERF 41-items	Adjusted HedPERF interview items for qualitatively probing international students	
	HedPERF Dimensions	International items
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowledgeable in course content 2. Caring and courteous 3. Responding to request for assistance 4. Sincere interest in solving problem 5. Positive attitude 6. Good communication 7. Feedback on progress 8. Sufficient and convenient consultation 9. Professional appearance/image 10. Hostel facilities and equipment 11. Academic facilities 12. Internal quality programs 13. Recreational facilities 14. Minimal class sizes 15. Variety of programs/specializations 16. Flexible syllabus and structure 17. Ideal campus location/layout 18. Reputable academic programs 19. Educated and experience academicians 20. Easily employable graduates 21. Sincere interest in solving problem 	<p>Academic aspects: support provided by academics and their attitude, accessibility, communication skills, feedback to students</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Knowledgeable and experienced, caring and courteous faculty and staff 2. Faculty and staff sincere interest in solving problems 3. Faculty and staff positive and encouraging attitude 4. Faculty and staff feedback provided on progress 5. Academic facilities and campus location/layout 6. Academic support and English language services 7. Reputable academic programs 8. Educated and experienced academics 9. Sufficient and convenient time for student consultation 10. Faculty and staff professional appearance/image 11. Quality of university programs 12. Faculty and staff providing feedback for improvement 13. Minimal class sizes 14. Flexible syllabus and structure 15. Variety of programs/specializations 16. Easily employable graduates
	<p>Non-academic aspects: support provided by non-academic staff</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 17. International recruitment services 18. International student's orientation activities (pre and post arrival) 19. Proactive resolution or assistance with legal and student visa issues 20. Availability of socially inclusive programs 21. Service provided within reasonable time frame 22. Professionalism of international admissions services 23. University responsiveness to request for assistance 24. Good and clear university communication towards students 25. Accurate and retrievable records 26. Knowledgeable of systems/procedures 27. Staff easily contacted by telephone, in person and via email

Original HedPERF 41-items (Continued)	Adjusted HedPERF interview items for qualitatively probing international students (Continued)	
22. Caring and individualized attention 23. Efficient/prompt dealing with complaints 24. Responding to request for assistance 25. Accurate and retrievable records 26. Promises kept 27. Convenient opening hours 28. Positive attitude 29. Good communication 30. Knowledgeable of systems/procedures 31. Feeling secured and confident 32. Service within reasonable time frame 33. Equal treatment and respect 34. Fair amount of freedom 35. Confidentiality of information 36. Easily contacted by telephone 37. Counseling services 38. Health services 39. Student's union 40. Feedback for improvement 41. Service delivery procedures	HedPERF Dimensions	International student-specific items
	Reliability: timely, accurate and dependable support of student	28. Responding to request for assistance Easy access to health and counseling services 29. Proactive housing, equipment and IT assistance 30. Recreational facilities and programs 31. Promises kept 32. Convenient opening hours 33. Positive attitude 34. Good communication 35. Sincere interest in solving problem 36. Efficient/prompt dealing with complaints 37. Availability of students' union and grievance process 38. Service delivery procedures 39. Social and intercultural support services
	Empathy: personalized, intentional and warm attention	40. Encouragement of active participation in extracurricular activities in or outside of the classroom setting 41. Equal treatment and respect of international students 42. Feeling of being secured and confident as international student 43. Confidentiality of information

Figure 11. Original (41 items) and Adjusted HedPERF (study guiding themes)

Appendix G Call For Participation in Research

Call for Participation in research	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are you a student at the School of Education?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Are you an international student?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Would you like to help understand students' perceptions of support services at Pitt?
Please Call/Text/Email "interested in participating" to the contact provided below	
	tgdl0@pitt.edu or 412-680-0795
	tgdl0@pitt.edu or 412-680-0795

Figure 12. Call for Participation in Research

Appendix H Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Dear University of Pittsburgh School of Education student,

Thank you for voluntarily agreeing to participate in this research. This form details the purpose of this research and describes the involvement required from you and your rights as a participant.

The purpose of this inquiry is to describe the international student's experience at Pitt and to understand how international students perceive the support services they receive. It also seeks to help contrast the student's perceptions against her/his prior expectations.

The benefits of this research will be:

- To better understand international students' needs
- To help improve support services for international students over time

The methods used in this study is: one-on-one face-to-face semi-structured interviews

Your participation will consist of an interview lasting approximately one hour. You will be asked a series of questions revolving around academic and nonacademic support services at Pitt. You are NOT required to answer these questions. You may pass on any question you may not have an answer to or that makes you feel uncomfortable. At any time in this process, you may decide to stop the interview and your participation in the study. There is no penalty for discontinuing participation.

Please feel free to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature and methods of this research. Please contact me at any time at the following e-mail address or telephone number: tgdl0@pitt.edu | 412-680-0795 (~~Tchetchet Digbohhou~~)

Our discussion will be recorded and saved as a digital audio file. This is meant to help me accurately capture your insights in your own words. The recording will only be listened to by me and by my research supervisor Pr. Maureen McClure for the purpose of this study.

I will not share any of your individual responses and prior communications with me with anyone other than my research supervisor Pr. Maureen McClure.

Insights gathered from you and other participants will be used in writing a qualitative research report, which will be read by my professor and presented as part of the fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Educational Doctorate. Although, direct quotes from you may be used in the final report/dissertation, your name and other identifying information will be kept anonymous.

You will not be compensated for this research

By signing this consent form, I certify that I _____
agree to the terms of this agreement. (Print full name here)

Figure 13. Informed Consent Form

Appendix I Interview Protocol-Instrument

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL-INSTRUMENT

Thank you for coming, I truly appreciate your taking the time to talk with me again. My name is Tchetchet Digbohou, I am the principal investigator for this research.

I would like to briefly restate the goal of this research. It is to describe the experience of international students at the University of Pittsburgh in order to better understand how they perceive the support services they receive. It also seeks to help contrast students' perceptions against their prior expectations. The benefits of this research are twofold: (1) to better understand international students' needs and (2) to help improve support services for international students over time. The method used in this study is: one-on-one face-to-face semi-structured interviews. This is meant to help me accurately capture your insights in your own words

Confidentiality - I want to make sure that your name or any identifiable information shared during this research is not disclosed or shared with anyone. I will not be collecting any of your identifiers prior to or during the recorded interview. Through a process called anonymization, I will be removing potentially identifiable personal information from the recording. I will make sure that no identifiers are directly or indirectly recognizable when listening to the saved audio files by deleting or masking personal information and quasi-identifiers

Tape recording -I will recording this interview. Please let me know if that is fine with you. If not, I am willing to take notes as you speak. The interview will be saved as a digital audio file. The recording will only be listened to by me and by my research supervisor Pr. Maureen McClure for the purpose of this research.

Reports - Insights gathered from you and other participants will be used in writing a qualitative research report, which will be read by my professor and presented as part of the fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Educational Doctorate

Questions - Do you have any questions about what I've said so far or about this research in general? Please feel free to ask questions or raise concerns at any time about the nature and methods of this research. Please contact me at any time at the following e-mail address or telephone number: tgdl0@pitt.edu | 412-680-0795 (Tchetchet Digbohoul)

I will be asking about your experience as a student at Pitt and about the academic and nonacademic services you received

2. I would like to better understand the academic aspects of the support services you are receiving at Pitt. Feel free to elaborate on your answers
 - a. What were your expectations regarding academic aspects of the support services you are receiving at Pitt?
 - b. How would you describe the staff and faculty attitude, accessibility, communication skills, feedback to students?

Probes:

- Were they knowledgeable and experienced?
- Were they caring and courteous?
- Did they show sincere interest in solving problems?

- Do they have a positive and encouraging attitude?
 - Did you receive feedback on your progress?
 - Are you satisfied/dissatisfaction with the staff and faculty attitude, accessibility, communication skills, feedback to students?
- c. How would you describe the academic support and English language services you receive?

Probes:

- Are the academic programs reputable?
 - What do you think of the quality of university programs?
 - Do sufficient and convenient time dedicated for student consultation?
 - What do you think of the faculty and staff professional appearance/image?
 - Do faculty and staff provide feedback for improvement
 - Are class sizes kept at a minimum?
 - Are the program structure and the syllabus flexible?
 - Are the programs and specializations varied?
 - Are graduates easily employable?
- d. How would you describe the academic facilities and the campus location?

Probes:

- What do you think of the campus location?
 - What do you think of the academic facilities location within the campus?
- e. What were your expectations regarding staff and faculty attitude, accessibility, communication skills, feedback to students prior to coming to Pitt?
- What do you think of the academic facilities layout?

3. I would like to better understand the non-academic aspects of the support services you receive at Pitt, namely international recruitment services, orientation activities, legal and student visa, social

a. How would you describe those non-academic support services at Pitt?

Probes:

- What were your expectations regarding non-academic support services prior to coming to Pitt?
 - What do you think of Pitt international recruitment services?
 - What do you think of international admissions services?
 - Are they professional?
 - What do you think of international student's orientation activities?
 - What do you think of pre and post arrival orientation services?
 - What do you think of resolution or assistance with legal and student visa issues?
 - Is resolution of or assistance with legal issues timely/proactive or delayed/reactive?
 - Are you satisfied/dissatisfaction with non-academic support services at Pitt?
- b. Are there any social/community programs?
- What were your expectations regarding social/community programs prior to coming to Pitt?
 - Are those programs inclusive?
 - Are those service provided within a reasonable time frame?

- c. Is the university staff responsive to your requests for assistance?
 - o What were your expectations regarding university staff responsive to your requests for assistance prior to coming to Pitt?
 - o Is the university staff knowledgeable of systems/procedures?
 - o Is staff easily contacted by telephone, in person and via email?
 - d. What do you think of the university communication towards students?
 - o What were your expectations regarding university communication towards students prior to coming to Pitt university staff responsive to your requests for assistance?
 - o Is that communication good and clear?
 - e. Does the university offer accurate and retrievable records?
 - o What were your expectations regarding university offering accurate and retrievable records prior to coming to Pitt university staff responsive to your requests for assistance?
4. I would like to better understand the reliability: timeliness, accuracy and dependability of student support services
- a. Is the university student support timely, accurate and dependable?
 - b. What were your expectations regarding university student support timeliness, accuracy and dependability?
 - c. Are you satisfied/dissatisfaction with the reliability: timeliness, accuracy and dependability of student support services?

Probes:

- o Is staff responding to your request for assistance?

- Are health and counseling services accessible?
 - Are housing assistance and equipment & IT services accessible and proactive?
 - Are recreational facilities and programs available and accessible?
 - Are support service promises kept?
 - Are support services opening hours convenient?
- d. Does the staff have a positive attitude? Sincere interest in solving problem
- Is the staff sincerely interesting in solving problem?
 - Efficient/prompt dealing with complaints
- e. Are there any social and intercultural support services?
- Are they well communicated?
- f. Are there any students' union and grievance process?
- g. Are there any support service delivery procedures?
5. I would like to better understand the empathy of student support services
- a. What were your expectations regarding empathy of student support services prior to coming to Pitt university staff responsive to your requests for assistance?

Probes:

- b. Are student support services personalized?
- c. Are student support services intentional?
- d. Is student support service staff warm?
- e. Is the staff caring and providing individualized to you as an international student?
- f. Does the staff pay attention to students' specific needs?

- g. Are you encourage to actively participate in extracurricular activities in or outside of the classroom setting?
 - h. Are international students treated equally and with respect?
 - i. Do support services make you feel secured and confident as an international student?
 - j. Is your information kept confidential by support services?
 - k. Do you enjoy a fair amount of freedom?
 - l. Are you satisfied/dissatisfied with the level of empathy of student support services?
-

Note to the interviewer

Themes to be covered during the interview:

A-How would you describe academics attitude, accessibility, communication skills, feedback to students

B- Non-academic aspects: support provided by non-academic staff

C- Reliability: timely, accurate and dependable support of student

D- Empathy: personalized, intentional and warm attention to students' specific needs

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