# Exploring Influential Factors Impacting Academic Achievements of International Students Enrolled in Mathematics Courses at an Idaho University

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## ABSTRACT

The mathematical learning experience for international students becomes complex because they must navigate between language differences and education systems together with the cultural traditions of their home countries. The presence of these barriers strongly impacts both their academic performance and overall university experience in U.S. institutions. This study examines four essential aspects that affect international students' achievement in mathematics at Idaho University: language barriers merged with cultural adaptation, educational background history and institutional support programs. The research results reveal the necessity of improved English language education in addition to multicultural acceptance programs and specialized academic assistance programs which serve as fundamental approaches for student academic success. The study gives universities detailed recommendations about how to establish inclusive learning arrangements that serve STEM discipline students.

**Keywords:** Mathematics, academic achievement, cultural adaptation, Idaho, language proficiency, STEM.

## INTRODUCTION

Globalization in higher education has driven universities worldwide to experience rapid enrollment growth of students from different parts of the world. Through their enrollment international students enhance academic diversity through their various cultural views and face academic demanding situations often. Mathematics proves to be more difficult for international students because of language barriers, cultural differences and inadequate teaching approaches. International students commonly face poor language abilities, which hinders their understanding of lectures, their ability to join discussions and their success in grades. The learning experience becomes harder because cultural differences determine classroom participation as well as learning preferences and teacher-student communication. The ability to grasp new mathematical concepts depends on how well the student knows mathematics before starting the new course. Although institutional services are available, their efficacy still remains unclear.

This study analyzes factors influencing the academic achievement of international students in mathematics courses at Idaho University. While examining language proficiency, cultural adaptation, and previous educational background, it also considers institutional support systems. The findings aim to provide insights into how to improve international student educational outcomes in mathematics.

### Problem Statement

This study used perceptions of specific international students enrolled in mathematics courses at Idaho University. However, most of these students face hurdles as they pursue higher education abroad. Many succeed because of acclimatization to a new environment, academic burdens, particularly for those whose first language is not English, and socio-economic factors, including language barrier. English proficiency, for international students, is key as it helps socialize with peers, a strong academic achievement predictor (Yeh & Inose, 2003). In the USA, the number of students speaking English as their second language has been

progressively increasing (Musu-Gillette *et al*., 2016). It is a shift toward this demographic within the mathematics classroom, in a dynamic, multilingual, multicultural setting in which English is the language for international students and in which the native languages for teachers and students are not similar.

**Research Question**

This study sought to address the question: "*What are the key factors influencing the academic achievement of international students enrolled in mathematics courses at an Idaho university?"*

International students participated in interviews focused on how the university support system, cultural adaptation resources, and course instructors impact their academic achievement as related to their self-reported grades.

**Significance of the Study**

This study focused on integrating factors previously explored in international student research with variables impacting the academic performance of these students enrolled in mathematics courses at an Idaho university. Enhancing comprehension of these factors and their significance in the international students' academic performance at the university will provide a foundation for creating and deploying support systems, cultural adaptation resources, and tailored teaching approaches by instructors to accommodate students better. Additionally, this study aims to afford international students the chance to not only contemplate their own experiences and viewpoints but also to assist other students in achieving greater success.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

International students have two main entry options, as outlined by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Service (2023). Through the F-1 visa category, U.S. noncitizens can become full-time students at seminaries, colleges, conservatories, universities, elementary schools, high schools and other approved academic institutions. The M-1 visa classification allows admission to students attending pre-established vocational programs which includes language training programs. Existing policies require F and M students to maintain a foreign residence that they do not intend to abandon. However, even if such students are beneficiaries of a permanent labor classification application or petition for an immigrant visa, they can demonstrate their intentions to depart after a temporary period of stay.

The worldwide mobility of international students experienced a threefold increase during the last twenty years (Glass & Cruz, 2022). The 2022/23 USA higher education welcomed 1,057,188 foreign students supported by over 210 countries and regions (IIE) in a 12% yearly growth pattern. India and China continue to provide the largest number of students who study at U.S. universities and colleges (IIE, 2023). International students from Bangladesh, Colombia, Italy, Ghana, Pakistan, Nepal and Spain have achieved new all-time high enrollment rates to study in the U.S. Modern statistics show that enrollment numbers of international university students in Idaho institutions have experienced a substantial increase. Three primary factors support this growth: geographical location, the rising global educational demand, and the growth of internationally recognized higher education institutions (Hou & Du, 2022).

International student contributions to the United States economy exceed $40 billion, according to the U.S. Department of Commerce report (IIE, 2023). University prestige receives substantial enhancement from the academic results achieved by students. Cultural diversity brought by foreign students improves the learning atmosphere for students throughout all campuses (Yu & Moskal, 2019). International students receive various advantages from studying abroad, according to Berdan *et al.* (2013). Through this experience, students develop better self-awareness while building their self-confidence and cultivating personal independence. The experience enhances students' capacity to understand different cultures and helps them develop interpersonal skills as well as provides better career prospects and allows them to master new languages. U.S. students experience different cultures when interacting socially with each other, while international students learn about the Western U.S. lifestyle during these encounters.

The language skills Chinese students acquire while studying in the United States create employment advantages for them upon returning home, which lead to better-paying job opportunities. The higher cost of American education becomes affordable for parents of single children in China. (McMurtrie, 2012, para. 12)

Academic challenges specifically affect international students when studying mathematics and other subjects. The U.S. higher education system presents specific learning obstacles to international students, according to Wu *et al.* (2015). Students face obstacles because they must overcome language issues as well as academic adjustment difficulties, and faculty-student communication problems.

## Factors Influencing Academic Achievements

International students often face exclusive challenges when pursuing academic success especially in mathematical subjects. The study by Wu *et al.* (2015) analyzes the difficulties international students encounter during their first year of enrollment at U.S. higher education institutions. Students face obstacles because they must overcome language issues, academic adaptation difficulties and faculty-student communication problems.

## Factors Influencing Academic Achievements

The number of students in the U.S. speaking English as a second language has been rising steadily (Musu-Gillette *et al.,* 2016). This demographic shift in the mathematics classroom translates into a rich, multilingual, and multicultural environment where international students are taught English by teachers whose first language is not English. Being multilingual benefits cognitive development and academic achievement. Additionally, studies have also highlighted improvements in creativity, problem-solving and intercultural competencies as being a potential benefit (Cummins, 2017; García & Wei, 2014). Students also struggle with the unknown American language and culture as they are transitioning into a new cultural context while having problems understanding mathematical concepts, procedures, and terminologies in English (Lara-Alecio et al., 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2013. Additionally, they may not be good at expressing themselves in a non-native language, thus feeling isolated or frustrated.

Acclimation to the norms, host language, culture and values has devastating consequences on students' psychological wellness in terms of psychological distress and physical and emotional discomfort while students try to fill the student role. Several predictors have been studied to acclimate students, including perceived social support (Brunsting *et al.* 2018). Teacher and student relationships vary, including informal faculty interactions, academic peer groups, personal tutorials, student service services, social networks, and close personal relations with friends and family. Social support has been shown to have a crucial potential as an enhancing experience that positively impacts students' psychological health (Bai, 2016). A study on social support and psychological adjustment found that social support offered played a significant role in the student's psychological well-being (Lashari *et al.,* 2018). Recent research further confirms that social support and mental health remain central to international students' adaptation, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic, where emotional resilience and peer interaction were key predictors of academic persistence (Yin *et al.*, 2024; Ying et al., 2025). Universities should be actively pushing social events and networks to build social support systems. Also, these initiatives should not be limited to local students pitted against international students but also to international students alone. It's possible to organize groups or clubs just for international students as it helps with their process of integration and adaptation. Neseth *et al.* (2009) study found a substantial positive relationship between teacher and friend support and students' semester course grades, underscoring the significance of the relationships in academic achievement.

Students emphasized the importance of their connections with American peers, faculty, and fellow international students for their overall academic success and well-being (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Allowing international students to enroll at the university is not enough because the institution needs mechanisms to help them successfully adapt and socialize with the wider campus community. The institution can help students integrate by offering more opportunities to meet people through multicultural groups and church groups.

University students need their peers and faculty relationships to handle academic and cultural demands at the college level successfully. Nonjudgmental and supportive interaction with faculty and peers were identified as being

beneficial. Conversely, behaviors and interactions perceived as patronizing or inauthentic had negative effects, leaving students feeling inadequate, further alienated, and hindering their academic integration (Iheduru *et al.*, 2022).

## Mathematical Education and International Students

Mathematics can be viewed as a distinct language, complete with its own vocabulary, symbols, grammar, and punctuation marks (Ellerton and Clarkson, 1996). However, mathematics instruction commonly occurs through a spoken language, like English (Zevenbergen, 2001). This language is essential for learning and teaching mathematics (Gorgorió & Planas, 2001). Thus, serving as a communication channel within the classroom and facilitating interactions between teacher and student (Smith and Ennis, 1961).

Moving to another country presents international students with multiple challenges beyond just cultural differences, which can lead to cultural shocks. The students face both academic and non-academic barriers. Learning in a system that uses English as an instruction language poses a substantial challenge to non-native English speakers who must adapt to new educational methods in a completely different educational environment. Students' learning strategies and learning styles may differ significantly from their previous experiences when moving to a new nation. International students often gravitate towards learning styles that are similar to those they are familiar with in their home country (Rodrigues, 2005).

According to Smith et al. (2019), various teaching strategies have been identified as contributing to both satisfaction among the students and perceived learning outcomes. These factors include academic integrity, assessment methods, assignment design, clarification of expectations, communication outside of the class, organization of lectures and delivery, visual communication aids and verbal communication skills. Effectively implementing these strategies can enhance the international student's academic success. In the Smith *et al.* (2019) study, the researchers examined the varying preferences of international students in STEM fields compared to those in non-STEM fields regarding 22 identified promising teaching practices. While both groups showed only minor differences in their most and least preferred teaching practices and their recommendations for improvements, significant differences emerged in specific areas like culturally responsive teaching and knowledge transmission.

In Smith *et al.* (2022) study, the researchers delved into the relationship between the effective practices for educating online international students and the satisfaction levels and perceived learning outcomes of these students. However, there are only a few teachers who have been trained specifically for teaching international students (Tran, 2020). Training gaps compound a culture where intercultural learning is not supported

## Self-Reported Grades and Academic Performance

Self-reported student grades are a common phenomenon in education research. Kuncel (2005) argue that these self-reported grades are typically reliable; hence, they can be employed as student performance measures in educational outcome and development studies (Ratelle & Duchesne, 2014). This finding supports the notion that self-reported grades might be an equally valid indicator of success in mathematics courses and an invaluable source of information regarding students' academic achievements.

Caskie *et al.* (2014) investigated reporting accuracy among undergraduates. What's more, they also discovered that women tended to overreport their actual college GPA, and men from lower-performing groups tended to underreport their college GPA. For example, students from different grading systems are likely to rate and report their academic performance in different ways than their educationally familiar counterparts.

While self-reporting grades are valuable sources of information about the academic experience and perceptions of the students, they should be regarded with care by researchers and educators. Self-reporting grades in this study will be accompanied by awareness of this consideration. Interpretation of international students' performance in mathematical courses at Idaho University will have a proper aggregate of the approach. Additionally, this will enable people to understand the factors that influence whether or not they are successful in higher education.

# METHODOLOGY

## Research Design

This study of the academic experiences of international students enrolled in mathematics courses at Idaho University employed a qualitative approach. In qualitative methods research, the meanings and concepts of certain phenomena through description are explored (Lune & Berg, 2017). It was determined by the research question nature and the intent of this research to tell the voices of international students in their diverse experiences and challenges that the narrative qualitative approach was the most appropriate. In this research method, participants provided detailed context-rich information about their educational transition to a new setting by reflecting on their academic experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

## Participants and Context

Four methods were used to recruit participants at Idaho University: tapping into friendship networks, using referrals from previous participants, performing direct outreach in common areas, particularly libraries, and sending email invitations through the International Students Office. Participants were students who attended undergraduate programs around the world, from five continents. Participants resided in the United States for periods ranging between four months and eight years. Students' enrollment showed equal gender representation across multiple college-level degrees, where engineering, mathematics, business, and computer and information science were the most popular fields.

## Data Collection

The process of research data collection spanned two distinct phases. The data collection's first phase involved distributing an online survey to 40 international students through Survey Monkey's platform. Participants received a consent letter that explained their rights and observed their voluntary nature along with their right to withdraw anytime without repercussions. Results from the initial phase helped define the questions for in-depth interviews.

Twelve participants (six females and six males) received semi-structured interviews in the second phase from various international backgrounds with academic concentrations in mathematics. The interviews occurred on campus over three months at times that worked best for each participant. Standardized questions formed the core of participant interviews but allowed for follow-up lines of inquiry that depended on how each person responded. With Creswell's (2009) methodological recommendations implemented, researchers conducted audio-recorded interviews followed by verbatim transcription. Reliability and validity were determined using multiple data sources and member checking to confirm participant interview transcripts.

## Data Analysis

The analysis utilized an inductive methodology, which integrated established qualitative research methods. Open coding was then used to extract primary themes from a systematic review of interview transcripts. A systematic process of segmenting and labelling transcript data led to structured data organization based on categories. Included research analysis which linked content from interviews with identified themes to ensure consistency and validity.

Specifically, the research also pursued thematic analysis to explore persistent themes and critical factors shaping the math course achievements of international students. Using an iterative coding method, researchers refined conceptual categories and lent validity to conclusions about international student challenges and corresponding institutional support systems. This research combined participant data to inform practical recommendations that could enhance international student experiences at Idaho University a STEM education.

# DISCUSSION

This study finds several key factors that predict academic success for international students taking mathematics courses at Idaho University. Challenges found therein resonate with literature that has emphasized language

barriers, culture adaptation and, to some extent, unfamiliar pedagogy (Yan & Pei, 2018; Guo & Guo, 2017). Similarly, this study found university support programs and social integration initiatives improved learning outcomes and overall satisfaction for students, largely mirroring the results from Ecohard and Fotheringham's (2017) study.

This study's results indicate the role that university support systems assume in academic success. Choudaha and Schulmann (2014) suggest that students find the provision of accessible academic advising, tutoring services, and peer mentoring as of significant value, echoing what participants claimed. Additionally, students who participated in cultural adaptation programs and language assistance efforts reported a smoother transition to their academic major.

Other major themes pertained to instructor engagement and teaching strategies. These findings are in line with what participants reported: they would benefit from culturally responsive teaching methods responsive to different learning styles and bridging the pedagogical gap between the countries they are in school in and the U.S., as confirmed in Choudaha and Chang (2012) who corroborated that international students learn from instructional methods that focus on inclusivity, flexibility, and active learning. However, the study found that despite available support, some still had difficulty integrating into academic and social settings because of institutional barriers, or a lack of awareness of resources available. This suggests that universities should spend more time connecting with students to guide them on the available support services — as indicated by Bondareva *et al.* (2014).

The World's best and brightest try their best but do so in the face of these challenges, demonstrating resilience and adaptability. The findings of the study suggest that universities will need to implement more proactive measures to help these students, including implementation of more mentorship programs, fostering intercultural dialogue, and pedagogical strategies that are centered on the diverse students ' backgrounds.

# CONCLUSION

This study points out which major factors influence international student's academic success in their mathematics courses at Idaho University. The U.S. remains the international students' top choice to study, yet various barriers impede international students' academic performance and enjoyment of the experience. The study results show that cultural adaptation resources, university support systems, and effective teaching strategies are crucial to improving the adjustment and success of international students.

Despite institutional efforts to provide specific support, international students are nevertheless confronted with language deficits, cultural acclimation, and divergent pedagogical methods. However, that doesn't mean they won't be tough and resilient — many of these students will keep fighting through hurdles and finish their programs. In particular, instructors can play an important role in curating an inclusive learning environment with their teaching strategies and engagement methods and can shape student outcomes.

A gap in research supports the importance of supporting international students as they finish up mathematical courses at an Idaho university, and this study fills that gap by researching how various support strategies help to improve international students' outcomes. Future research could study the joint effect of university resources, cultural adaptation initiatives, and faculty participation in more effective intervention interventions unique to international students. By filling these gaps, educational institutions can shape a setting that is more inclusive, supportive and academically invigorating for these students.

# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Universities should increase their orientation programs, intercultural workshops, and mentoring opportunities for international students who do not have instant success in becoming part of the social and academic environment.

2. Robust English language support considerations such as tutoring services, writing centers and conversation clubs should be provided to international students to help enhance their communication skills and bring them to a level close to natives.

3. Instructors should include flexible learning approaches that complement different learning styles and integrated culturally responsive teaching methods.

4. Universities need to create more robust advising networks, mental health resources, and financial aid for international students to be able to solve these problems more successfully.

5. Study groups, extracurriculars, and networking events create an opportunity where international students can study with domestic students.

6. Future studies may need to focus on other factors besides economic background that could affect the academic success of international students in STEM education, as well as institutional policies and changes in pedagogical practices.

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