

COPING STRATEGIES AMONG INTERNATIONAL POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS AT ONE SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY



Misozi Chiweshe¹⁺



Ndileleni Paulinah Mudzielwana²



Tawanda Runhare³

¹University of Zimbabwe, Zimbabwe.

¹Email: misozichweshe@gmail.com Tel: +263733408917

^{2,3}University of Venda, South Africa.

²Email: Ndileleni.Mudzielwana@univen.ac.za Tel: +27832573243

³Email: Tawanda.Runhare@univen.ac.za Tel: +27833879903



(+ Corresponding author)

ABSTRACT

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This paper's purpose was to explore coping strategies employed by international postgraduate students at one South African university amid challenges faced during their studies. The study was a qualitative case-study where data was collected through telephonic semi-structured interviews with 14 international postgraduates, with the prime objective of examining the nature of departure intentions and coping strategies of the international students and then present an analysis of the coping strategies adopted through the process of thematic coding. The findings indicate that while students had high departure intentions, they managed to complete their studies by relying on various coping strategies. Within this positive trend there were variations within individual experiences and coping strategies. The recommendation was that institutions should talk about international student support services before and at arrival, and during the study, to link students to relevant support structures such as counselling and support groups.

Contribution/ Originality: The study provided survival strategies of international postgraduate students (IPGS extracted from the narratives of their experiences thereby generating new knowledge and literature that expands research on coping strategies of IPGS. These findings improve understanding and perspective of the construct's departure intentions and coping mechanisms, valuable contributions to theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

Internationalisation of higher education has become a part of global power competition among nations (Abbas, Alturki, Habib, Aldraiweesh, & Al-Rahmi, 2021). Characteristically, South Africa has keenly stood up to the global trend (Dominguez-Whitehead & Sing, 2015) and become a host to a relatively significant number of international students (Chinyamurindi, 2018; Schoole, 2011). In South Africa, The South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (2020) defines international students as "Persons admitted by a country other than their own, usually under a special permit or visa, for the purpose of following a particular course of study in an accredited institution of the receiving country." It has been documented that university experiences are known to be challenging for students, more so for graduate students studying abroad (Ammigan & Laws, 2018; Fass-Holmes, 2017). Such challenges that include communication related issues, academic concerns, (Lin, 2012) and cultural shock (Kusek, 2015) can cause stress among IPGS (Snoubar, 2017). However, in a literature review by Turashvili and Japaridze (2013) some scholars regard stress positively and repute it as a source of personal growth and development for international students. Perhaps, that is reason why regardless of the challenges, International Postgraduate

students (IPGS) are known to complete their studies despite the challenges that are known to influence the departure intentions of university students (Titrek, Hashimi, Ali, & Nguluma, 2016). Accordingly, in their bid for better opportunities such as acquiring a foreign higher degree certificate, future job security and an international life experience (Snoubar, 2017) IPGS react to the challenges by coming up with ways of coping with their struggles (Turashvili & Japaridze, 2013). What is inconspicuous from studies is the debate on how international students manage to succeed amid the challenges encountered. Far less is known about how IPGS cope with the struggles for them to post success (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). This is against the background that internationalisation of higher education is viewed as a contributory factor to the enhancement of institutional status that lead to improved positioning in the competitive world rankings of universities (International Briefs for Higher Education Leaders, 2018). This leads to the question of how IPGS persevere under the harsh conditions of studying abroad. It is, therefore, worth enquiring about the coping strategies employed by IPGS at one South African university. Understanding how international students cope amid struggles encountered creates an encompassing and reliable understanding of their anxieties while studying in a foreign country.

The focus of this paper was, therefore, to explore coping strategies employed amid the challenges faced using the lived experiences of IPGS at one South African university. Coping strategies are used as the conceptual framework to analyse the coping mechanisms displayed by IPGS in universities. In developing the arguments, this article set the following objectives to guide the study:

- (1) To examine the nature of departure intentions among IPGS at one South African university.
- (2) To analyse coping strategies adopted by IPGS at one South African university.
- (3) To provide suggestions to how best South African universities may help IPGS cope with stress which result from the struggles of studying abroad to attract and retain more IPGS.

1.1. South Africa's Internationalisation of Higher Education and its Significance

In comparison to the United States, South Africa comes second after as the main destination for students from Anglophone sub-Saharan countries that also encompass Ghana, Nigeria and Kenya (Kwaramba, 2012). Similarly, earlier writings supported by recent writings show that South Africa as a nation, has witnessed a steady growth in the number of international students enrolled in its Higher Education Institutions [HEI] (Chinyamurindi, 2018; Kwaramba, 2012; Sehoole, 2011). South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (2017) highlights that during 2013–2014 there were 73 859 international students in South African public universities which saw a substantial growth from the 46 687 enrolled in 2002. The highest percentage (73%) of the international students came from the Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries while other countries on the African continent contributed 16% with 9% of the students coming from the rest of the world. From the SADC countries providing the most students in South Africa, top on the list is Zimbabwe, followed by Namibia, Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland respectively (Kwaramba, 2012; Mokhothu & Callaghan, 2018).

Similarly, globally, South Africa is among the top ten destinations for foreign students and stands as one of the top five in receiving international students in the Sub-Sahara (Kwaramba, 2012). The trends are an indication of South Africa's global competitiveness in attracting international students worldwide and the African region. This positive trend of movement in South Africa, as stated by the South Africa Department of Higher Education and Training (2020) is eased by the 1997 SADC Protocol on Education and Training which stipulates that HEI in its member states should reserve at least 5% of their admissions for students coming from other SADC countries and the international students should be given the same treatment as local students in terms of tuition and residence fees (Kwaramba, 2012). The aim of the initiative, as the author mentions, was to provide a framework for regional co-operation in addressing educational needs such as standardization of entrance requirements, the harmonization of the academic year and the ease of credit transfer. Further, South Africa has embraced the enterprise with most universities having lower tuition fees for the SADC international students compared to the non-SADC students.

By approving the protocol, the South African government undertook its initial step to internationalise higher education in the country which saw the greatest increase realised in IPGS programmes. International students are important to South Africa for financial and academic gains (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016) the critical skills needed for the growth of the economy, enhanced overall reputation, development in research capacity (Department of Business Innovation and Skills, 2013) and correspondingly provides workplace diversity (Groarke & Durst, 2019). Reciprocally, IPGS gain academic success, employment opportunities, wider networks, foreign language(s) proficiency, and cultural awareness, among other benefits.

South Africa continues to attract regional foreign students because of the use of English as the medium of instruction, low cost of living (Chasi & Quinlan, 2021) its proximity, low tuition fees and the perceived high quality and reputation of the South African higher education (Department of Higher Education and Training: Republic of South Africa, 2019). However, mobility in HEI of South Africa has again risen steadily (Dominguez-Whitehead & Sing, 2015) reaching about 42 268 foreign students in 2018 of which 34.7 thousand were from the Sub-Saharan with Zimbabwe still sending the largest share of the international students (Kwaramba, 2012). With the rising enrolment, appropriate policies are therefore required for international students to enjoy rewarding social and educational experiences (Department of Higher Education and Training: Republic of South Africa, 2019).

1.2. Departure Intentions of International Students

In many higher learning institutions, student retention is very important if institutions must remain viable to meet the obligation of the needs of a country. Research has proven that enrolling as a postgraduate student is the onset of a period of recurrent stressful life changes (Hatunoglu, 2020) for most postgraduate students because of the multiple events that go with postgraduate experiences that include navigating the new environments, creating relationships and the rigour of postgraduate studies (Turashvili & Japaridze, 2013). This is coupled with the inconsistencies between the support students can access and the support they need (Coates, 2014). Because of the stressful events, IPGS have greater departure intentions than their domestic counterparts (Radloff & Coates, 2011; Van der Meer & Comer, 2011). Departure intention is defined by Coates (2014) as “the departure from an institution before the completion of a qualification” and “the analysis of such intentions is important for it offers insights on the space prior to any actual departure into which institutions must intervene”. The adverse effect of departure intention is in contradiction to the global move of student retention and attrition reduction in HEI (Crosling, Heagney, & Thomas, 2009). For some reason, despite the nagging thoughts of leaving the institutions prematurely, international students remain attentive to their studies. It is because of the deliberate move to study abroad that it is not surprising for IPGS to exhibit characteristic coping strategies moderated by the influences of their stressful experiences abroad. The processes of coping distinctively curb premature departure intentions. Rilveria (2018) confirms that developing coping strategies is a human ability to resolve or manage a problem which varies with individuals. Research also suggests that an institution’s expenditure on student services is significantly associated to its student retention and attrition such that institutions that prioritise provision of student support services record lower levels of student dropouts (Coates, 2014).

1.3. The Conceptual Framework of Coping

Coping strategies are basic categories used to classify how people react to stress (Rabenu & Yaniv, 2017). The different coping strategies are generally classified into basic categories of problem-focused, emotion-focused and adjustment-focused (Hatunoglu, 2020; Turashvili & Japaridze, 2013; Yue & Lê, 2013). Per the mentioned authors’ view, problem-focused coping is employed where one can take steps to change the reality. It seeks to resolve problems or modify the cause of stress. It is a more engaging strategy that includes rational responses focused on information, planned action and confrontation against stressor sources. On the other hand, emotion-focused coping is aimed at regulating emotions associated with the struggles where people resort to other people’s support to

handle the situation. It aims to reduce or change the emotional distress associated with the circumstance encountered. Accordingly, emotion-focused coping is a submissive strategy that involves eliminating the emotions with positive reconsiderations against stress sources. Adjustment-focused coping is where students familiarise with the struggles while putting much focus on their studies. It is used to solve the problem by providing a reduction in emotion intensity. One of the turning points in the lives of the youths is the time they attend university which is considered a stressful environment (Hatunoglu, 2020) more so for students studying in a foreign country away from the familiar home environments. Rilveria (2018) suggests preference of which coping strategies to adopt, and the frequency of use of the strategy will vary from person to person. Bearing that in mind, it was very interesting to explore how IPGS reacted to the unique adversities encountered during their study period. The above classification of coping was the basis that informed the study. This is against the background that, despite the known struggles of international students very little is known about how IPGS respond to the struggles in a South African university set up.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative methods of collecting data at one South African university. A purposive sample of 14 IPGS composed of both former and current IPGS constituted the participants. To arrive at the required sample size, convenience and snowballing selecting techniques were employed. The dimensions of departure intentions and coping strategies were captured through audio-taped, one-on-one telephonic interviews using semi-structured questions to allow for a flexible interactive nature of a dialogue with the participants. The study acknowledges the strength of qualitative researches that combine multiple methods of data collection as suggested by Tracy (2013) and therefore had the intention of engaging the dynamics and diversity of a focus group to stimulate a discussion that would unmask data not possible to gather by individual telephonic interviews (Flick, 2009; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). But, due to the travel restrictions and social distancing rules triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of the study, group discussions paused logistical scheduling and social distancing problems and therefore, the study fell short of focus group discussions. The study also took cognisance that, for many qualitative researchers, the best way to understand what is going on is by moving into the organisation being studied and becoming engaged in the activities to experience what it was like to be part of the setting (Creswell, 2009; Krauss, 2005). Unfortunately, this was similarly restricted by the COVID-19 pandemic protocols. However, this study had the advantage of the insider research as opposed to outsider research (Fleming, 2018). The researchers being student and staff at the university meant they already were native to the site and familiar with some of the potential respondents (Greene, 2014) (rephrase). The data captured was managed, sorted and organised through the process of thematic coding. To uphold confidentiality and anonymity of the IPGS, pseudonyms and a combination of the letters IPGS (International Postgraduate Student), level of study (Masters [M] doctoral [D]), status (current/former [c/f]) and numbers 1-14 were used. The pseudonyms adopted were IPGS1cD (international postgraduate student 1 current doctoral) for the first interview participant, IPGS2cM (international postgraduate student 2 current Masters) for the second interview participant, up to IPGS14 depending on the level and status of the student.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *Departure Intentions of International Students*

The main purpose of the study was to explore coping strategies employed by IPGS amid challenges faced abroad. When asked if IPGS had ever thought of leaving the institution prematurely, the findings suggest that at one point, several of the IPGS thought of leaving the institution due to stresses triggered by challenges encountered during their studies. This validates (Radloff & Coates, 2011) assertion that international students have higher departure intentions than local students. For some reasons, none of the IPGS who had thought of leaving

the institution left, but they rather chose to remain focused on their studies. The option for soldiering-on hinged on their sheer determination and desire to complete their studies without delay. Among the reasons why IPGS had thought of leaving were that the university did not meet their expectations; they had strained and stressful relationships with supervisors; they faced financial challenges due to the withdrawal of the work-study and the study visa stipulated the name of the university of study. They feared changing the university would violate immigration rules resulting in starting all over the whole rigorous process of becoming an IPGS. Therefore, IPGS painstakingly shared their emotions on departure intentions.

Some IPGS, while they had thought of leaving prematurely could not leave because of their determination to complete the studies. One IPGS shared "... definitely that thought crossed my mind several times... So, when you see those goals there, you can't just change... because my options were limited, I just had to stay strong and keep focused (IPGS14fM). Another IPGS add "at some point it was getting tough. I was not thinking of leaving the institution but I knew in life nothing comes easily ...I couldn't wait to finish and leave (IPGS11fM).

Some of the IPGS had thought of leaving because of the strained relationships with their supervisors but persevered to complete their studies because of the migration issues, where the name of the institution is stipulated on the study visa. The response was "like I indicated, my supervision relationship was very poor and it was frustrating and I was worried that I was not going to be able to complete my study within the time. The only reason that made me stay was because I was an international student. My visa was for that institution (IPGS7fD). On the other hand, one respondent was quick to mention that they preferred studying elsewhere but they would rather maintain the same supervisor. The IPGS said "I have thought of leaving many times and if I finish my Masters studies I would rather register elsewhere for my PhD. I will still be willing to work with my supervisor" (IPGS2cM).

For some, the intent to leave was because some universities offered better services than the current. They shared, "There was a time if I had gotten a better offer I think I would have really left (IPGS9fD). "If there are greener pastures somewhere I can withdraw and leave the institution at any time (IPGS4cD). One more added:

... because at some point I felt the university is not very ideal place especially to postgraduate students specifically international students. ...at some point, I was like, ... immediately after my masters I should leave the country for another, maybe I could get a PhD somewhere that may stand my taste (IPGS3fM).

One IPGS was stressed because of the funding which was withdrawn midway the study period and was left to fund for themselves. The student lamented "because they were no longer funding for degrees, they had stopped the work study and the funding was no longer provided as per the standard that we know" (IPGS12cD).

One IPGS gave an array of the triggers which made her want to leave the university before completion. The student narrated:

So many times, because you know sometimes when things are not moving like you need to access funds and you can't access them. You go to offices and you are looking for services and the services are not given to you, you know, so many times and then there are times when we didn't have water in the residence and sometimes you do not have electricity (IPGS5cD).

However, there were IPGS whose intention to leave was not an option for them because they had clear targets to complete their studies at the institution of study and they also anticipated the challenges at any given university. Both students laughed and stated "Definitely not. I came here for a reason (IPGS6cD). "No, I have never thought of leaving because every institution has got its own challenges. You are there you just have got to finish (IPGS10cD).

Surprisingly in this study, most of the IPGS who participated had the intention to leave the university prematurely but still none of the respondents fulfilled their thoughts despite their anxiety levels. Correspondingly, a study on international postgraduate students in New Zealand made similar remarks that international students are more likely to have seriously considered leaving their university before completing their studies but chances were very slim that they would drop studies prematurely (Van der Meer & Comer, 2011). The observations confirm

earlier studies that have made the same conclusion that challenges motivate international students to develop coping mechanisms that help them succeed with their studies (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). The suggestion is that the more emotionally challenged IPGS were, the more determined they became to successfully achieve their academic goals. The findings of this study are consistent with Tinto's model of integration that suggests the decision to drop out is a process based on the student's institutional environment and background factors (Wu et al., 2015). At the same time, the model suggests it is the relationship between the individual's commitment to the goal of college completion and his commitment to the institution that determines whether the individual decides to drop out or not (Swail, 2004). The fact that IPGS became more committed to their studies than focusing on their intentions to leave is a result of their commitment to the institution and the goals of college completion.

3.2. Strategies Employed by IPGS to Cope with Engagement Challenges

After experiencing the said challenges, IPGS made intentional efforts to react to the challenges and came up with creative coping mechanisms to engage in their studies amid the struggles. From the findings, the coping strategies theme was developed that captured the students' reactions. Results revealed three levels of coping strategies adopted by international students. The first, was that the mechanisms were understood to be emotion-focused coping. The second was the problem-focusing coping and the third was the adjustment-focused coping. Figure 1 shows that three sub-categories emerged from problem-focused coping, four from emotion-focused coping while four emerged from the adjustment-focused coping.

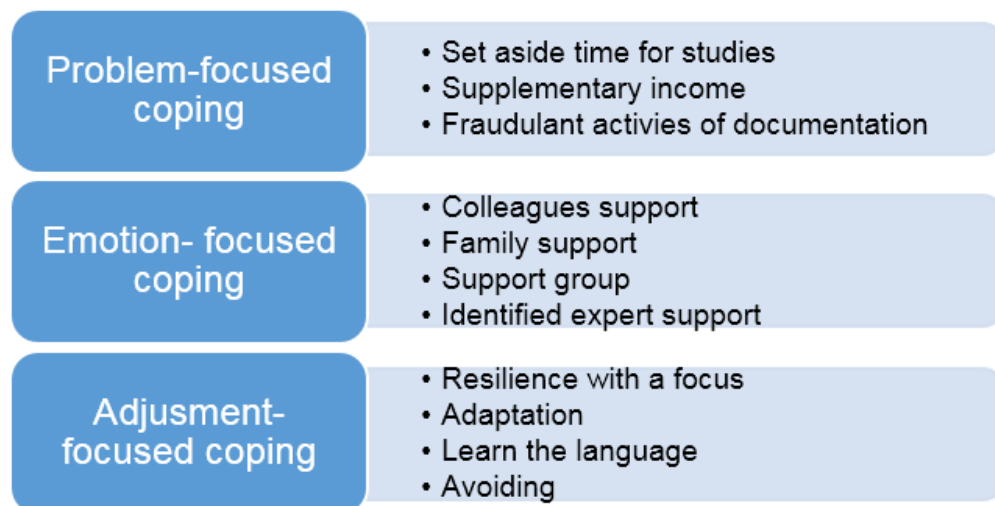


Figure 1. Coping strategies of IPGS.

3.2.1. Problem-Focused Coping

Some IPGS took an optimistic approach to cope with the unique challenges by taking control of problems that they supposed could be changeable (Yue & Lê, 2013) through time management and financial supplementation as pivotal to not only completing their studies on time but to ensure quality work while still dedicating time to other worthwhile activities. One student decided, *"I would say quite a number of challenges but overall the challenges are not beyond my control or something that I wouldn't handle"* (IPGS3fD).

Some IPGS relied on their skill of time management and believed if they dedicated themselves to studies by managing most of the time available around their studies, they could cope well despite the struggles faced. With a laugh, the explanation was:

You know with best work I think it requires one to be dedicated and to always set aside time for your studies. If I get stuck on what to write I always put a hold on the work do some reading and get back. (IPGS10cD).

One student placed importance on time management. The international student believed it was important to allocate time for reading but also allowed time for all the people who were part of the learning experience as a coping strategy. The student made sure to:

...also try to see if I can have more time with them [faculty] because remember this thing is not all about looking for this information on the internet like literature review and all but you are managing time with the relevant stakeholders and the supervisors involved even with the department (IPGS14fM).

One IPGS decided, if the institution or other people could not help financially, they had to find ways of generating income for survival while still concentrating on their studies. Luckily, the students managed to secure a bursary later. The student revealed:

At some point, I had to seek employment on a part-time basis that was during my masters, but during the PhD, I was continuing with my job and I also managed to secure a bursary. So, it was a relief to that regard (IPGS8cD).

While some students honestly sought employment, it was unfortunate that, as a last resort, some IPGS had to engage in unconventional means to cope with the financial challenges. One student revealed:

... and when it comes to the funds that you are supposed to use or for your studies it is quite difficult for postgraduate students to get the funds and they end up resorting to fraudulent activities on documentation and to get the money. (IPGS10cD).

3.2.2. Emotion-Focused Coping

At times IPGS had to deal with issues or situations that were unchangeable and therefore, could not handle the challenges by themselves. They relied on other people to manage the challenges. For such cases, IPGS used emotion-focused coping where they turned to research groups, experts in the field of study and supervisors to intervene for the sake of their emotional, physical and mental well-being. With positive minds, some IPGS appreciated the benefits of a good support system when one is studying away from home and therefore, utilised the dynamics of a support group system to handle the academic struggles. The stories told were:

... Input from my colleagues, where we have weekly presentations. So, I would say with all that support it wasn't all that challenging, because there is a built-in support system here. We have weekly presentations where people give you ideas you think through and then you can improve your work (IPGS 6cD).

So, it means you can deal with it because there is good support from the research group and the supervisor although we sometimes face challenges on the support we are supposed to get ... as a university (IPGS2cM).

While also acknowledging the existence of the struggles, one former doctoral student counted on the support of the family back home. The student reflected:

You had to rely so much back from home and the likes. It was a bit challenging ... To me, if you want me to work I would just say no any challenge that comes with postgraduate studies within the university there are challenges and every student could handle" (IPGS3fD).

For the academic challenges beyond the capacities of colleagues and family where the supervisor could have provided, specialised proficiency was sought. One responded suggested "*I actually identified an expert in that area with the methodology I had*" (IPGS13fM).

3.2.3 Adjustment-Focused Coping

As expected, IPGS were not surprised with the struggles encountered in their new environments. Hence the decision was to "*stay strong and keep focused* (IPGS14fM) *on things only applicable to them such that they "sometimes ... had*

to do without things" (IPGS5cD). Similarly, IPGS14fM reacted "*Perseverance, aah, at some point it was getting tough. I was not thinking of leaving the institution but I knew in life nothing comes easily. I couldn't wait to finish and leave*" (IPGS14fM).

Some IPGS committed to adjusting to the new environments as a way of managing stressful conditions. One student chose to ignore the stressor events but concentrate on the positives of the struggles strengthened by the prospects of getting a foreign qualification. The narration was:

I would say it doesn't affect me that much. If it doesn't concern me I ignore it. I don't take it so hard. This is how I cope; I just deal with what benefits me and what is relevant and pertinent for me to be able to achieve the objective that I would want at that time (IPGSd8).

Similarly, another student commented: "*Ya, hey, that one [language barrier] requires one to just relax and just see how things unfold, thus how I deal with it*" (IPGS11fM). And yet another respondent reiterated: "... you have to endure up until you are certain that your results are out and you have passed and everything. That's it. With other things, you just endure (laugh) you just endure and move on" (IPGS9fD). The argument is further strengthened when IPGS9fD supported with a chuckle "... you just have to deal with it in your manner. You just tell yourself that I think you have to brace up and not to make peers hear sometimes as to how you would just move on from it" (IPGS9fD).

Several IPGS told how they managed to go around the struggles of the language barrier. One student decided to learn the native language to deal with the problem, "... I have learnt just trying to learn their language to understand and communicate better with them" (IPGS10cD). Another student saw no offence in her not being fluent in the native language and, therefore, was prepared to mingle with the locals so that she could learn the language faster. The comment she made was:

I think they just have to live with it [her broken native language], I try to pick up a sentence or two and they will laugh at the way I pronounce it. But once I was serious about getting to know them and associating with them, they were like ooh it's cool it's ok, just learn to know like that (IPGS13fM).

Conversely, one student decided not to mingle with people who did not appreciate that she was not conversant in the local language and chose to only socialise with those who accepted her situation of not knowing the language. She narrated, "*I tried to avoid people who had such an attitude. I tried and befriended people who appreciate that you cannot learn a language in a day. It really takes time [knowing a language]*" (IPGS2cM).

The purpose of this study was to highlight the coping strategies employed by IPGS amid challenges they face as foreign students. It was revealed that IPGS used different coping strategies which fell within the framework of the coping strategies and sometimes simultaneously depending on the stressor event (Turashvili & Japaridze, 2013). For example, some of the respondents avoided the locals who preferred to use the native language which the IPGS did not understand but at the same time they accepted to learning the language. Naturally, as seen from the reactions, students used a mixture of all the types of coping strategies which undeniably changed as students adapted to the struggles such as language barrier and financial constraints. Similarly, another study in Australia found no clear demarcation among coping categories and in most cases used a combination of the three to cope depending on what kind of a situation was prevailing (Yue & Lê, 2013). The same study in Australia corroborates that most IPGS had a positive attitude towards the difficulties encountered because of the anticipated prestigious foreign postgraduate qualification. This study disputes the idea that whoever is studying abroad has intentions of gaining permanent residence and securing a job in the country. The reason is that many international students are dynamic individuals who are highly skilled at adapting to living and studying in a country they highly respect (Tran and Gomes "Stereotyping international students is unjust". University World News, The global window on higher education. May 1, 2015. For example, another Australian study of international students in the school of medicine revealed that "the most significant factor that aided participants in their persistence and progression in the medical programme was their key goal of becoming medical doctors" (Malau-Aduli, 2011). Scholarly literature on

IPGS has it that coping strategies effectively boost international student's psychological and social being (Yue & Lê, 2013) and because IPGS made a deliberate decision to study abroad, which itself involves overcoming a range of barriers, they quickly adapted to challenging situations (Hovdhaugen & Wiers-Jenssen, 2021) and for that matter IPGS generally preferred problem-coping strategies.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

There are practical ways institutions can employ particularly for international students to help them persist and succeed in their studies without any struggles. By talking about student support services before arrival, at arrival and during the study period can play a role in linking students to relevant support structures such as counselling and support groups. Students should not be let to navigate their way as some of them often lack confidence to go and seek for services. There is also need for more discussion as a priority, through research, on coping strategies for international students because of the peculiarity of universities and the diversity of international students. More so, studies focused on coping strategies should target different institutions to inform relevant authorities to view coping strategies as unique to certain university peculiarities compared to a universal approach. The sample size was one of the limitations for this study. Future research of such student population should introduce a wider spectrum of data by including university personnel such as counsellors and local students that interacted with the IPGS for triangulation of data sources. Similarly, more significant results can be achieved if various data collection methodologies can be triangulated.

5. CONCLUSIONS

From the evidence provided, IPGS dealt with multiple challenges as part of their academic life. In the process, they developed various coping strategies which were employed simultaneously in their determination to complete their studies. Authors have recognised the challenges experienced by non-traditional students and point at the institution being critical to helping IPGS cope with their studies (E. R. Kahu, 2013). The author submits that student engagement can be fostered for all students by adopting institutional practices that activate mediating mechanisms. Without that, the findings suggest students will always turn to friends and family if institutions cannot be of assistance because per R. Kahu and Nelson (2018) chronic or extreme anxiety can lead to disengagement and withdrawal. Hence, the stance taken by IPGS to adopt coping mechanisms for the struggles is commendable. While suitable coping strategies are employed, suitable solutions are found, resulting in minimised stressful life among IPGS who in turn gain quality and efficiency from the university experiences abroad. It is therefore crucial for IPGS to use positive coping strategies often to help safeguard against the adverse effects of stress such as ill-health and disengagement from studies and the institution.

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