

Chapter 8

A Narrative Study of International Students' Sense of Belonging in Kazakhstan: Implications for Higher Education Institutions



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8.1 Introduction: Kazakhstani Context

Attracting international students to study in Kazakhstan has become a main goal for the Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan in terms of internationalizing higher education and turning its capital into a regional educational hub in Central Asia (Koch 2014). In 2017, the joint-stock company “Center for International Programs” announced that, by 2020, Kazakhstan plans to attract 50 thousand international students (BNews.kz 2017).

The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan intervenes in all aspects of higher education provision, including financing, management, education content, and admission process (Sagintayeva and Kurakbayev 2015). Higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kazakhstan have always been considered semi-statutory bodies supporting the government initiatives. And although Kazakhstani HEIs are in the process of gaining autonomy from the state, the Ministry still has a strong influence on public universities, which were forced to include the agenda of attracting international students into their internationalization strategies. The influence of the Ministry can be easily traced. First, the goal of raising the number of international students by 3–7 percent was introduced into the university presidents’ labor contracts in the form of key performance indicators (KPIs). In other words, the presidents’ work as university leaders is assessed based on these KPIs (Zhandybayev 2018).

Second, every year the joint-stock company Center for International Programs organizes educational fairs called “Days of Kazakhstani Education” for recruiting international students in such target countries as India, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. The aim of these fairs is to promote Kazakhstani universities abroad, advertise

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educational programs, and encourage international students to come and study in Kazakhstan. Participation in these fairs is not mandatory for HEIs; however, it is strongly recommended.

Finally, in 2018, the Bologna Process and Academic Mobility Center, which is a subordinate organization of the Ministry of Education and Science of Kazakhstan, announced that starting from 2019, international students are now able to apply for the state scholarship online and have a chance to choose any Kazakhstani HEIs as their study destination. To compare, in the previous years, only a few selected universities could host international students studying in Kazakhstan via state scholarship. This change in the application procedure was designed to motivate HEIs to be proactive in the international student recruitment process. The benefits for the universities include revenue, prestige, and the possibility to internationalize their curriculum.

We can see that much is being done in the field of attracting international students; however, not enough is done in the field of retaining and providing them with a comfortable learning environment (Mukhamejanova 2019). The international offices at Kazakhstani universities that were established to accommodate international students' needs face a number of challenges performing their work. They experience a lack of support and training from the university administration that often leads to misunderstandings about how they should work with international students (Sparks et al. 2015). This chapter draws on a research I conducted in 2016 (Mukhamejanova 2018), which was addressed mainly to the practitioners dealing with international students on a day-to-day basis. I attempted to shed light on the experiences of international students in Kazakhstan, highlighting their motivations to study in this country, adjustment problems, and positive aspects. I also found that a sense of belonging developed by the research participants helped them adapt to the Kazakhstani academic and social environment smoothly.

In this chapter, I further examine the nature of a sense of belonging. First, I review the definition of "sense of belonging" and then its significance for international students. Kazakhstan offers an interesting case of initiatives toward shedding light on the experiences of international students. Using Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) "three-dimensional narrative inquiry" approach, I focus on international students' experiences that influenced the development of their sense of belonging to their host universities and to the country in general. I conclude with implications for practice and some suggestions for future research.

8.2 A Sense of Belonging

8.2.1 Definition

A number of recent studies have focused on examining the nature and features of a sense of belonging. Baumeister and Leary (1995) and Sawir et al. (2008) consider a sense of belonging as a fundamental human motivation and define it as “a need to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of interpersonal relationships” (Baumeister and Leary 1995, p. 499). And because the need to feel belongingness to someone or something is a strong motivation, the authors argue that it stimulates people to activate their agency to satisfy it (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Hurtado and Carter (1997) continue the idea by stating that a sense of belonging has both cognitive and affective sides, helping people evaluate their role in the society and act accordingly. Baumeister and Leary (1995) differentiate between two features of a sense of belonging. First, people need to have frequent positive interactions with other people. Second, people need to feel that they are cared for and loved. Putting it differently, a sense of belonging is cultivated when a person has not only frequent contacts with people within his or her community but also develops a deep and lasting bond with these people.

Kember et al. (2001) write that in the academic literature, the concept of sense of belonging is equated with the concept of integration. Hausmann et al. (2007) agree with Kember et al. (2001) in the consideration that a sense of belonging is often examined “as the result of social and academic integration, rather than ... an independent construct” (p. 806). However, Hausmann et al. (2007) postulate that the integration defined by them as “one’s level of involvement with the community” (p. 806) is distinct from the sense of belonging, which they identify as “the psychological sense that one is a valued member of the college community” (p. 804). In other words, integration requires people to change and fit into their environment in order to be part of it, whereas a sense of belonging is developed on people’s perception that they are valued in their community for who they are.

Talking about university students, O’Keeffe (2013) further highlights the distinction between integration and a sense of belonging by stating that “a sense of belonging will be difficult to attain if the students feel as though they are required to compromise who they are in order to fit into the campus climate” (p. 611). O’Keeffe (2013) holds the view that universities should acknowledge the diversity of students and support them in building a comfortable environment for everyone. Similarly to O’Keeffe (2013), Yao (2016) indicates that the students’ sense of belonging “includes students’ perceptions of institutional support” (p. 78), which when combined with positive relationships with fellow students elicit a strong feeling of belongingness and affiliation to a university. In his work, Glass (2018) develops this idea to the next level, claiming that “a sense of belonging cannot be equalled with a sense of community alone; belonging involves political participation where international students act as citizens of the campus to collectively advocate for their own interests to shape policy and budget decisions” (para. 20). This means that students

who have a strong sense of belonging to their university feel comfortable to take an active part in the university's social and political life.

Summing up, a sense of belonging is a human motivation to form meaningful relationships with people, to feel a valued member of the community, and to participate in the decision-making process concerning the future of the community.

8.2.2 Significance for International Students

According to the academic literature, a sense of belonging or not belonging to one's social circle influences that person's behavior and attitude toward other people in a significant way (Hurtado and Carter 1997). A lack of social belonging might cause anxiety and other psychological problems (Baumeister and Leary 1995). A number of studies on university students' sense of belonging found that the students with a low sense of belonging are more likely to drop out than the students who feel a strong affiliation with their university (Kember et al. 2001; O'Keeffe 2013). Moreover, Hausmann et al. (2009) showed that a sense of belonging to a university might also influence how well students perform in the classroom. Hausmann et al. (2009) conducted an experiment where they sent students small gifts like baseball caps and ID holders with a university logo imprinted on them as a token of appreciation for their membership in the university community. This was done to see whether such intervention can influence the students' sense of belonging. The results of the experiment showed that even low-cost intervention emphasizing students' valued membership can foster their sense of belonging and lead to better performance and persistence in the classroom. Hausmann et al. (2009) concluded by cautioning higher education institutions against ignoring the issues with students' sense of belonging, especially when it comes to students "at risk of being marginalized" (p. 653).

Regarding this, the researchers who have been studying international students' sense of belonging to a host university and host country agree with Hausmann et al. (2009). They state that international students experience a lot of challenges with developing a sense of belonging to a new environment because; as a homogeneous group with an outsider status, they are often stigmatized and marginalized (Moores and Popadiuk 2011; Walton and Cohen 2007; Yao 2016). Sawir et al. (2008) see the cause of these challenges to developing a sense of belonging in the stress that originates from the process of relocation from home country to host country, which often involves separation from meaningful relationships. Phelps (2016) supports Sawir et al. (2008) by indicating that relocation can "interrupt people's established senses of who they are and where they belong in the world" (p. 3).

Forbes-Mewett and Nyland (2008) draw attention to an interesting finding, which resulted from their qualitative research with 55 international students studying in Australia. They found that "a sense of belonging is one of the most important sources of security" for international students, which means that without feeling

that they belong to the university and host society in some way, international students will not feel safe in their new environment.

Those studies indicate that a sense of belonging plays a great role in people's lives, especially when they move to a foreign country to study. A lack of sense of belonging to a host community might result in international students' depression, poor performance, loneliness, and dropping out. On the other hand, a sufficiently developed sense of belonging can help international students perform better in the classroom, persist when dealing with problems, and feel safe in their surroundings. Studying the ways international students develop a sense of belonging might allow people working with them understand their experiences better and identify appropriate intervention procedures (Hurtado and Carter 1997; Moores and Popadiuk 2011). However, few studies have been conducted in Kazakhstan on international students' sense of belonging to host universities. The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine experiences that influenced international students' sense of belonging to their host universities, in particular, and to Kazakhstan, in general.

8.3 Methodology

Narrative inquiry allowed me to understand international students' experience "holistically in all its complexity and richness" (Webster and Mertova 2007, p. 10). Among the different approaches to narrative research, I utilized the one called "three-dimensional narrative inquiry" by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). This approach is based on Dewey's (1938/1997) theory of experience, wherein experience is considered as continuous and contextual and produced only by means of interaction. Therefore, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest studying experience by placing it inside the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. One of the dimensions of the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space is "the dimension of temporality." Studying people's experiences in this dimension means attending to these people's past, present, and future. Another dimension is "the dimension of sociality." This dimension "directs attention to the relational ontology of narrative inquirers" (Clandinin 2013, p. 41), which means that it encourages researchers to remember that human experience is constructed through interaction among people and to be aware that this interaction encompasses not only the relationship between a research participant and his or her environment but also the relationship between a research participant and a researcher. There is also "the dimension of place," which refers to the specific physical and topological contexts where the experience is taking place.

I selected participants through purposeful criterion sampling based on their sociodemographic characteristics, behaviors, roles, or the specific experiences they had (Ritchie et al. 2003). I obtained their contacts from the international relations departments of their universities. My participants were six international students: Aaron from Afghanistan, Zoe from England, Sophia from Russia, Eugene from South Korea, Michael from Ukraine, and William from the United States. They all

had been studying at Kazakhstani HEIs for at least 6 months, were not ethnically Kazakh, came to Kazakhstan with a student visa, and were fluent in English, Kazakh, or Russian.

I conducted a total of 18 in-depth interviews, three with each participant in English and/or Russian. All interviews were organized over a 3-month period, from March 14 to May 25, 2016. During those interviews, the participants were asked to narrate their experiences of living and studying in Kazakhstan. Examples of questions on a sense of belonging included the following: “Can you describe your relationship with your instructors?” and “Have you ever felt that you have to blend into/fit in the Kazakhstani society to be successful in your studies and social life?”

Data analysis began with creating participants’ individual narrative accounts according to the three-dimensional narrative inquiry analysis. I examined their personal and social interactions with people within and outside their host universities in Kazakhstan and with relatives, friends, colleagues, teachers, etc. in their home countries. I analyzed how their past experiences may have influenced their behavior in the present and how it was reflected in their future plans. I studied how physical and geographical places—such as their home countries, Kazakhstan, host university, places where they lived in Kazakhstan, and other foreign countries where they lived before coming to Kazakhstan—may have shaped their feelings, thoughts, and actions. Simultaneously, I reflected back on my own background and encounters. Eventually, I was able to identify separate themes in the transcripts and, using them as starting points, created participants’ individual narrative accounts.

In order to understand how these international students developed a sense of belonging to their host universities and Kazakhstan, I performed a cross-account analysis that, according to Clandinin (2013), allows researchers to look across individual narrative accounts “to inquire into resonant threads and patterns” and can offer “a deeper and broader awareness of the [participants’] experiences” (p. 132). I was looking for resonant threads related to the development of a sense of belonging across the six individual accounts.

8.4 Findings

As a result of the cross-account analysis, I identified seven resonant threads, which revealed how participants interacted with peers and participated in social activities, how they interacted with faculty and administration, their language level and organization of courses, their accessibility to resources and existing restrictions, their knowledge about Kazakhstan prior to coming to Kazakhstan, the meaning of the clothes they wore, and how the overall social climate in the country influenced their sense of belonging to their host universities and to Kazakhstan.

8.4.1 Interaction with Peers and Participation in Social Activities

All participants¹ indicated that having friends and enjoying social life with them were essential for their overall well-being and helped them feel that they belonged to their host universities and Kazakhstan. Some participants made friends among their group mates, and events like singing contests and beauty pageants organized by their host universities brought them together. The other participants met people outside their university community while participating in sports or attending concerts. In their interviews, Sophia and William explained:

If you do not have people to communicate with, you will never adapt to a foreign country. You will always feel lonely and miserable. You need at least one person to communicate with, one person who will support you unconditionally. (Sophia, April 8, 2016)

I very much try to keep myself busy, so I do not like to be in the house even when it is very cold. I have met a lot of people here, so I have a lot of friends. I just try to do things outside, being active like playing ping pong or visiting the national museum. (William, April 1, 2016)

These findings are consistent with the results of the studies by Andrade (2006) and Hurtado and Carter (1997), who found that activities requiring the participation of the whole group foster a sense of cohesion within the group and enhance a sense of belonging in each individual.

Sawir et al. (2008) came to the conclusion that fruitful interaction with international and local students is not possible without the thoughtful intervention and pastoral care of the host university. This conclusion coincides with my study where the participants complained about a lack of opportunities to communicate with other local and international students. They wished their host universities would pay particular attention to engaging them with the broader university community by organizing sightseeing trips, picnics, meetings, and mentoring programs. Michael declared wistfully:

Life on the main campus is in full swing, but I hardly ever participate. My group mates are not interested in going. I went several times by myself and felt lonely. I wish I knew international students from other departments. We could go and take part in these events together. I bet they feel left alone sometimes too. (April 29, 2016)

8.4.2 Interaction with Faculty and Administration

All participants had good relationships with the faculty members and felt that the professors teaching their cohorts were very professional and truly cared about them. The international students communicated with their professors not only in class but

¹All participants' names are pseudonyms.

also during office hours or while getting ready for some special events, for example, New-Year party or Nauryz. Sophia suggested:

If you feel that you are lagging behind the group or you want to improve your overall grade you can come up to them [professors] and ask for an additional assignment or something like that. They do not refuse to help. (March 25, 2016)

These findings tie well with previous studies where the authors indicated that one of the most important aspects influencing positively international students' sense of belonging is their interaction with faculty members (Curtin et al. 2013; Glass et al. 2015; McClure 2007). These authors highlighted that in order for the interaction to enhance international students' sense of belonging, it should be genuine; students should feel the care and receive academic support from their professors.

In my study, interaction with the administrative personnel was not always positive. Some students were very satisfied with the level of assistance they received from the international relations departments and academic advisers. Others had very negative experiences, from instances of disinformation about university rules concerning their stipends and financial help to having to deal with migration registration problems. Those happened due to administration specialists' neglect and indifference. Sophia reported her difficulties with the migration bureaucracy:

Last year I received a call from the Migration Police saying that my registration was not prolonged because my university had not sent the documents on time. I contacted the specialist at the university international department who was completely unaware of what was going on. She could not even tell me what I should do in order to reverse the situation. (March 25, 2016).

The participants also indicated that the negative experiences they had with the administrative personnel made them feel marginalized and unwanted. William reflected poignantly on his sense of exclusion:

The university does not per se view myself and my other group mates as real students, because we technically are not involved in their degree programs, we just study Russian here. So we are not as equal as normal students at the university, we are not on their radar. (April 5, 2016)

These findings support previous observations by Kember et al. (2001), who reported instances when students were alienated from their universities by unsatisfactory interactions with administrative personnel.

When I asked the international students what their host universities should do to improve their experiences and show that they are valued members of their university community, the majority of my participants underlined the importance of having specific people, who would work only with international students, and of creating a welcome-package with the most necessary information. Sophia pointed out that:

If we had one person at each department who was completely trained to work with international students, who would know everything about the documents and procedures needed from international students, it would make our life so much easier. (March 31, 2016)

Later, Zoe added:

The package could include all the information necessary for new coming international students. For example, how to get a library card, or how to buy a SIM card, or how to open an account in the bank. This kind of information. Or even simply where to buy groceries. (May 22, 2016)

8.4.3 *Language Level and Organization of Courses*

I found that the students' level of Russian language competence and the way their classes were organized affected their sense of belonging. The better the students knew Russian, the more comfortable they behaved in their environment, and consequently, the more chances they had to talk to people and make themselves understood. Aaron recognized:

I felt like a child just sitting with my pen in my hand and looking how everyone else was taking notes and asking questions. I felt miserable and wanted to go home. (March 20, 2016)

It is interesting to notice that, once they learned Russian, these international students started feeling more at home in Kazakhstan. And that feeling continued even when they went back to their home countries. Aaron talked about the disorienting feelings he experienced when going home during holiday breaks:

When I am visiting my parents in Afghanistan during holiday breaks, I often feel that I am a guest. My whole life is now rooted in Kazakhstan. I behave like I am a guest and I talk often like a foreigner because I subconsciously use Russian words in my speech. (March 20, 2016)

A similar pattern of findings was obtained by Yao (2016). While investigating the influence of language competence on international students' sense of belonging in America, Yao (2016) found that language can be both a bridge, fostering communication and developing a sense of belonging, and a barrier, hindering interaction and causing loneliness.

In my study, the organization of their education was perceived by international students as a reflection of the quality their universities provided in regard to teaching and learning. When the organization was "good," they praised it and wanted to be associated with the university; when it was "bad," they criticized it and expressed their disappointment. Michael, for one, appreciated his schedule, more than other students did:

Our classes start at 4:00 p.m., sometimes 6:00 p.m., and end at 7:00 p.m. or 9:00 p.m. People unfamiliar with the system might think that this schedule is strange, but I think it is perfect. You see, most of my group mates are working people. They would not be able to attend classes if the classes were scheduled in the morning or even afternoon. (April 29, 2016)

However, Zoe was rather baffled and unhappy with her schedule and course organization:

I have four classes [of Kazakh language] with four different teachers. They are good people and good teachers. However, they did not create a unified program for me. Every teacher teaches me whatever she thinks is needed. Can you imagine that? (May 18, 2016)

Those findings are consistent with the research by Kember et al. (2001), who also found that through organizational arrangements of courses it is possible to nurture students' sense of belonging to the university. However, in contrast to my study where students paid attention essentially to the general arrangements of courses, Kember et al. (2001) underlined the important role of teaching methodology. For example, they noted that the courses promoting discussion, group work, and joint projects are significantly more effective in developing feelings of inclusion and affiliation among students than the ones based on reading lectures.

8.4.4 Accessibility to Resources and Existing Restrictions

The participants found themselves in several situations when they were refused access to the university resources or had to deal with restrictions put on them by the administration. Aaron explained that international students in his university were not allowed to travel to other cities in Kazakhstan, even during holidays. They were not allowed to use the gym on holidays either. William did not have an ID card for 6 months, which made his access to the university buildings troublesome. Eventually, the frustration from experiencing this kind of inconveniences built up and distanced the international students from their host universities. Aaron seemed to understand, up to a certain point:

You know, the university does not want us to get in trouble and that is why it does not allow us to travel to other Kazakhstani cities. We have visited all the interesting places in this city where we could afford to go, and now during holidays it gets very boring. I went to the university gym to ask for the permission to come and play during the holidays, but apparently it will be closed, and they do not trust students with the keys. (March 19, 2016)

These findings are in accordance with what has been found by Kember et al. (2001), who wrote that the students who had access to such university facilities such as library and swimming pool reported a higher sense of belonging to their universities than those students who did not have such access. Along the same line, Glass (2018) wrote that "international students' sense of belonging is shaped by the restrictions they are subject to, including legal, political, and social restrictions" (para. 15). The students in my study did not report experiencing any legal or political restrictions; however, the social restrictions to which they were subjected were enough to cause disappointment and alienation.

8.4.5 Knowledge About Kazakhstan Prior to Coming

One interesting finding not discussed by other researchers was the positive influence on the international students' sense of belonging of their knowledge about Kazakhstani people and Kazakhstan prior to coming to the country. I found that all the students gathered information about Kazakhstan while still in their home countries. This information was about weather, political stability in Kazakhstan, living cost, local languages, and religion. Interestingly, the students viewed the information they received from their ethnically Kazakh neighbors, relatives, and friends who lived in Kazakhstan more trustworthy than the information they could find on the Internet. I noticed that this prior knowledge helped them feel more relaxed and safe when they first came to Kazakhstan. Sophia felt very confident:

I did not have a single doubt. I did not think that it would be difficult for me because of a different language or religion. My boyfriend's family is Russian too and they live pretty comfortably in Kazakhstan. (March 25, 2016)

William found enough singularities between Poland and Kazakhstan, which confirmed his expectations prior to coming to his host country:

I think Kazakhstan was somewhat like I expected it would be as far as the infrastructure, architecture, and the weather...Kazakhstan and Poland are both post-Soviet countries, they are similar in some ways, so I knew that the adjustment would not be as hard as in a very different country. (March 29, 2016)

8.4.6 Clothes Students Wore

Another finding that was not discussed by other researchers, and that for me was completely unexpected, concerned the clothes the participants chose to wear in Kazakhstan. I realized that the style of clothes, their color, and the meaning behind them affected greatly how comfortable the international students felt in Kazakhstan, how they wanted to be seen by locals, and how much they wanted to blend into the host environment. Aaron told me that, when he first came to Kazakhstan from Afghanistan, he used to wear his traditional clothes, but felt uncomfortable around "casually dressed Kazakhstanis." And when he returned to Afghanistan, the following happened:

It will seem funny to you, but we never wear jeans in Afghanistan. When we go back home we see all people wearing traditional clothes, while we are in jeans. It is a very unpleasant feeling. You feel different. We usually immediately change our clothes to traditional attire. (March 20, 2016)

Eugene explained that he started toning down the color of his clothes because he did not want to stand out too much.

I could not help noticing that the colors people wear in Kazakhstan are always very dark. When I came here, of course, I brought the clothes I had in South Korea. And when we were in that shopping center, I was stared at a lot, because I was the only man in red. (April 6, 2016)

8.4.7 Overall Social Climate in Kazakhstan

All participants indicated that the overall social climate in the country has a positive impact on their sense of belonging to Kazakhstan. In particular, the participants mentioned the hospitality and friendliness of local people, low level of racial discrimination, and safety at night. William stressed Kazakhstan's singularity:

I think Kazakhstan definitely has its own identity, people associate it with Russia, this is not true. Kazakhstan is very much its own country, it has its own traditions and cultural norms. So I think I learned what those are. (April 5, 2016)

On the other hand, Michael emphasized his sense of welcoming and even "brotherhood":

I am Knyaz [Prince] of Kiev who came to his brothers of the Great Steppe. I saw only hospitality and respect here. I got accustomed to the life in Kazakhstan. (April 29, 2016)

Similar results were found by Hurtado and Carter (1997) and Stebleton et al. (2014), who focused on assessing the influence of campus climate on the students' sense of belonging and statistically showed that a welcoming atmosphere inside the university is one of the most important factors universities should consider when building international students' sense of belonging. And although in my study the students were mainly talking about the overall social climate in the country, I came to the same conclusion.

8.5 Implications for Practice

In this chapter, I reported on the experiences that influenced international students' sense of belonging to their host universities and host country when coming to Kazakhstan. I discussed how they developed a sense of belonging while studying and living in Kazakhstan by interacting with peers, faculty, and administration and by participating in social activities organized by their host universities or taking place outside the university campus. I also learned that the participants' sense of belonging was affected by their language level, knowledge about Kazakhstan prior to coming, and the overall social climate in the country. Such aspects of their experiences, including the organization of their program and courses, accessibility to resources and facilities, existing social restrictions, and even the clothes they chose to wear, were paramount to the cultivation of feelings of belonging to, and affiliation with, their host community.

Examining their narratives, I came to the conclusion that international students' sense of belonging is equally important for their well-being and the internationalization process of higher education institutions. Both parties should work together to achieve the goal of having international students who are identified, and identify themselves, as equal and valued members of the host community and of fostering a

university campus, where the recognition of diversity and an inclusive learning environment are not mere rhetoric in the university promotion booklets.

To reach this goal, I recommend that higher education institutions in Kazakhstan (and other countries) wishing to retain their international students and develop a program for internationalization consider the following research-based implications. It would be beneficial to both international students and host universities if the latter could:

- Provide newly coming students with a welcome package consisting of a booklet with the necessary information about the host university, the city, the country, and migration regulations, opening bank accounts, applying for Individual Identification Number, getting a student's ID card, registering in the library, etc. It would be a good idea to add a few simple gifts with a university logo on them. It can be a backpack or a water bottle, something students will enjoy using. According to previous research, this kind of kit helps enhance students' sense of belonging.
- During the first weeks of orientation, assign every two or three international students a mentor among senior students. International students will feel more at ease interacting with fellow students and will have a chance to get acquainted with the city, local students, etc. This kind of volunteer work will benefit the mentor as well; he or she will learn how to communicate with foreigners, use foreign languages, and care for others.
- Organize seminars for faculty and administration of host universities on the issues of inclusivity, diversity, equity, and intercultural communication. It is important to encourage faculty members to interact with international students more often. Administrative personnel should be approachable.
- Elect one person among international students to become a member of the students' government. This person would act as a representative of international students giving them a chance to voice their challenges, ask questions, and participate in the political life of the university. Only by making their own decisions will international students feel safe and become true members of their host university community.
- Assign one person from every school or department to be an international students' academic adviser. International office specialists usually deal with migration issues, visa application, and housing. Academic challenges of international students often remain unattended.
- Provide students with 1 or 2 months local language lessons. This would help them interact better with people outside the university campus and accelerate the development of a sense of belonging. If international students study in one of the local languages, they should have an opportunity to study it throughout the academic year.
- Provide international students with access to all resources and facilities open to local students. There should be no discrimination.

- Explain existing and just-released regulations and restrictions to international students in details. It is very important to treat them with respect and compassion as responsible adults.
- Engage international students to participate in the social life of their host university. They should be able to take part in all cultural events, holidays, and celebrations. It would give them a chance to share their own culture, unique experiences, and new perspectives while making their bond with local students and other international students stronger. International students would gain a sense of contributing something to their host community. And local students and faculty would have a chance to expand their knowledge and gain firsthand understanding of other cultures and diversity.
- Inform international students about counseling services available at their host universities. If there are no counseling services available, it is important to consider establishing them. It would benefit not only international students but also local students.
- Distribute and analyze questionnaires about international students' experiences at their host universities. It could be done once a semester. This way, people working with international students would be able to assess the progress of their work and timely introduce necessary interventions.

8.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed the nature of international students' sense of belonging to their host universities and host society and found that international students' sense of belonging is greatly influenced by such aspects of their academic and social lives as interaction with fellow students, faculty members, and administration of the host university; participation in social events and sport; their perception of campus climate; accessibility to the university facilities; organization of classes; and even their perceived language level. The participants' narrative accounts depicted that all these aspects are within the host universities' power to improve. It led me to conclude with a number of suggestions in the ways higher education institutions could foster their international students' sense of belonging.

The findings of this study suggest a need to conduct a longitudinal study of international students' sense of belonging. Using the three-dimensional narrative inquiry approach, I would encourage researchers to examine how international students' sense of belonging to their host universities evolves over a 2–4-year period. The understanding about how international students' sense of belonging changes over time would help host universities choose intervention techniques relevant to different stages of these students' experiences studying abroad.

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