

## International Students Thesis Writing Experiences in the Northeast Normal University

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### Abstract:

*The study explored the theses writing experiences among the international students pursuing master degree in education at Northeast Normal University of China. The study aimed to examine the challenges international students faced in their theses writing process and the coping strategies adopted to overcome such challenges. A sample of 5 participants were recruited from the few master students in the faculty of education to participate in the study. Interviews were used to collect data for the study. The interview sessions were audiotaped and transcribed for analysis.*

*The study revealed that international students writing their theses were characterized with inadequate research skills, financial supports, time frame, and technology-related skills. The study also showed that students were less proficient in the English Language; the medium of instruction in international education program in the Faculty of Education. However, various coping strategies were revealed by the study; taking of remedial and extra lessons as well as seeking assistance from friends, peers, and professors. Others also indicated they had to adjust their budgets and spending to meet the demands of their thesis's projects.*

*It was hereby recommended that; the postgraduate master degree international students needed to acquaint themselves with basic research skills, be proficient in the language of instruction (English), as well as technology-related skills prior to theses writing projects.*

*Universities could also provide formal academic adaptation and adjustment programs to educate and guide international students to adapt more easily to their academic environs.*

**Key words:** Experience, international student, thesis, etc.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Thesis writing is mandatory for all categories of students including international students who are pursuing Master degrees in education. Under this program students are expected to conduct research to meet the partial fulfillment of their masters' degrees' requirements. The duration of research under this type of degree is two semesters. Once allocated supervisors, the students begin working on their proposals, an exercise which culminates in proposal presentation and defense. The panel of supervisors, basing on the presentations, decides whether or not the students should proceed to the next step of their research. However, many of these international students have been experiencing some challenges in writing the master thesis. This is because most of these students have just graduated from bachelor degree program and may not have the research skills required to write the thesis research. This paper therefore explored the students' Experiences in writing the theses research in education by a group of second year students.

Globally, general concerns have been raised by various stakeholders in diverse higher education contexts about the quality of theses and dissertations. It is often reported by quality assurance officers and external examiners that theses and dissertations turned in for partial fulfillment of higher educational degrees were generally low. Included among the categories of students investigated were international higher degree students in diverse research programs, local students, among others (Wang and Li, 2008; Bitchener and Basturkmen,

2006; Holbrook et al., 2004; Lessing and Schulze, 2003). This hereby necessitated the urgent call to examine the challenges faced by a group of international students studying their master programs in Education in the Northeast Normal University. The study aimed to investigate the observed experiences of the international students of the Northeast Normal University studying in master programs in education.

It is believed that such experiences may help unmask challenges being encountered by students as well as exposing the students' limitations in conducting research. The information to be obtained may then be used to design mitigation strategies, enable future students at the university to complete their theses successfully. Diverse studies have been conducted in attempts to discover the experiences of various levels of students in writing theses. Some of these illustrated that challenges faced by postgraduate international students while writing their thesis included time constraints, language barrier, difference in socio-cultural environment, low research supervisor's commitment and insufficient research facilities and materials (Claudius, 2016; Yeoh & Terry, 2013; Chang, 2006). In addition, other researchers have noted that the postgraduate international students have been faced by some difficulties like lack of research skills, poor selection of thesis topics, family and financial difficulties (Ekpoh, 2016; Ismail, Abidden & Hassan, 2011).

It had been concluded that most international students in diverse contexts in light of the premised difficulties mentioned failed to successfully complete their various research degree programs. The discussed hindrances variedly affected international students' potentials in completing their theses within the deadlines. Time constraint significantly constitutes a factor that affect various aspects of students' lives. As student-researchers, international students amidst their course works and busy schedules have to work out times to complete their research works. These may include, returning to their home

countries to collect data which consist of contacting the respective ministries and departments for consents letters. This could be time consuming for students to follow the bureaucracy to gather all these documents before moving into the research field student-researchers. Among others as discussed included the disparities in the sociocultural backgrounds of students and study-destinations. Students' adjustment and adaption depending on their sociocultural backgrounds could affect students' adaption to methods of study and research as well (Ismail et al., 2011; Ekpoh, 2016, p.2).

Studies in higher education constitute course work, dissertation/theses, and research degrees. Regardless of the kind of study students undertake, they are required to conduct researches to demonstrate their mastery of the area of study. Illustrated by studies conducted in related fields, it was realized that students often faced 3 key challenges in their theses writing process; 'the research design, the data collecting and processing and the report writing' (Lessing & Schulze, 2003; Helm, 1989). These three major aspects comprised the key components of the thesis/dissertation writing process. The research design which may include the array of plans and structure of the thesis determines the success or failure of the whole research work. It is where students state and clearly define how the research would be carried out. As such, a good and an appropriate design connotes relevant findings in the research project and the vice versa. On the other hand, the data collection and analysis constitute an important aspect of the thesis document. Collecting the right data, from whom to collect the data and where can be challenging to international students.

The final aspect which consist of the data analysis and reporting nonetheless is an all-important aspect of the research thesis. Due to the nature of international studies grounded on diverse sociocultural perspectives of learning, choosing the right analysis procedure also hinder students in completing

successfully their higher degree programs. In one aspect, the analysis procedure that merit a particular study can be complicated for students, as such, the data analysis cannot be reported. Good analysis of research data delineates easy and appropriate reporting of findings and discussion. If a student chooses a wrong data analysis procedure for a particular data, it connotes that, the findings may not fit the study which can affect the quality of the thesis. It can be argued that majority of students with the international students included find the whole process of theses and dissertation writing challenging as an academic task (Huang, 2007). It is therefore necessary to examine such challenges and make recommendations that might possible resolve the situation among international students.

Accessed literature also indicated that varied epistemologies regarding the education/research works in home country versus abroad encompassed significant factor that affect the thesis writing of international students. This in effect encompasses the curriculum and research believes of the home country and destination of study abroad (Cadman, 1997). Research methods and techniques due to the sociocultural variations of different countries may vary significantly. As such, international students may face difficulties in constructing a single uniform idea about a phenomenon. Rooted in the previous curriculum and research ideologies in the home country, alterations in the current destinations of study may be difficult, as a result may influence the thesis composure of international students. International students' successes in academic adjustment and adaptations may possibly soothe students' difficulties in theses and dissertation writing.

Kaakinen (2017) found that positive peer group influence helps the post graduate students to overcome the challenges in writing their thesis research. That is, seeking assistance from course mates, friends, seniors who may have experienced the research procedures in one way or the other

fundamentally have significant effects on theses writing of international students. This according to the researcher arouses and maintains students' confidence in academic and research works as it boosts their efforts in completing their theses and dissertations before deadlines.

In summary, theses writing and dissertations constitute about 70% to 80% of higher research degrees. As a result, students of all categories irrespective of their levels of study strive to complete their theses and dissertations before deadlines. Completing the theses and dissertations among students often come with many challenges as discussed including diverse epistemologies that comprise research in diverse contexts, obscurity of choice of research design, data collecting and analysis, as well as reporting of findings. It is hereby necessary to examine such challenges in different contexts to ascertain various procedures and strategies that may resolve the situation. Grounded on such emphasis, the current study investigated the theses writing experiences and coping strategies of the international students studying in Faculty of Education at the Northeast Normal University. The study therefore aimed to find out;

- a) the challenges faced by international master degree students of education in their thesis writing process and
- b) the coping strategies these students employ in order to overcome those challenges.

## **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

### **Participants**

Five final year's international students writing their theses/dissertations were recruited to participate in the study. They were composed of 3 males and 2 females and aged between 21 years and 35 years old. All of the participants pursued education and had stayed in China for less than 3 years. All participants have studied in the Northeast Normal

University for 2 years. Participants were hereby subject to inclusion in the study if they were international students in their final year of studies and most importantly writing a dissertation or thesis. A final condition observed was that if participants were willing and available to participate in the study.

### **Procedure**

The researchers following participants acceptance to be involved in the study arranged an hour, 30 minutes visit to their dormitories to have them interviewed. Self-reported data from the participants was collected for the study. Prior to the visits for the interviews, the researchers confirmed with the participants to ensure their convenience and availability before the visit. Students were engaged in a one-on-one interview with the researchers for an hour and 30 minutes to solicit their views about their experiences in writing theses as international students in the Northeast Normal University. The interview sessions were therefore recorded using laptop computers, audio recorders, and phones which were later transcribed for analysis.

### **Instrument/Measures**

The interview instrument was composed of the students' demographic information including age, gender, duration of study at NENU, and their majors. The interview was also comprised of 9 major themes which are: research skills in writing the theses, proficiency in English language, time allocated for the thesis, technology-related skills, financial support, peer assistance, supervisor's commitment as well as students' ability to overcome these challenges. This information was collected in attempts to examine the international students' theses writing experiences and coping strategies in the university.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The paper examined the theses writing experiences and coping strategies among international students. The self-reported data collected from the participants were transcribed and coded thematically into the following themes; research skills in writing the theses, proficiency in English language, time allocated for the thesis, computer skills, financial ability, peer assistance, research facilities/seminars, supervisor's commitment as well as students' ability to overcome these challenges.

### **Research skills in writing the theses**

All the participants revealed that they got their thesis research skills during their period of study at the university especially during course work sessions in the first year. They illustrated how significant the course work meant to them as they assumed little was known about research and theses in their previous studies in their home country.

*"I can rate my research skill a bit high almost 70 or 75% but before I came here, I did not know much about it, what I did during my bachelor degree was much theoretical with little emphasis on research. When I came here two years ago, I have developed my research skills. However, being here, we have done various research related courses in the class and in the seminars",* the first participant stated.

On participant also shared the same idea that she first learned about the research and thesis writing in a master degree program at Northeast Normal University. *"I did my bachelor degree in linguistics where I had no opportunity to learn about any research or thesis related skills, but in the first year of my master degree we had some courses that helped me to improve my skills, so by the time I started my research I was quite ready for it".*

One of the participants however differed from her colleagues on the acquisition of the research skills at NENU. She said she did not learn much about research skills at NENU. *“It is ok, I can say my research skills are neither bad nor good but just in between. This one is just the experience that I came with because here I didn’t learn much about the research. Of course, even in the seminar and in the research class not much was learned compared to what I learned in my undergraduate degree”, a participant exclaimed!*

### **Proficiency in English Language**

Proficiency in English language which was the medium of instruction for the international program of MA/PHD was another challenge that the students experienced during their theses writing process in their master degree programs. Mastery of the English Language connotes some level of ease in successfully writing up theses among the international students. Most of the students have admitted that they had varieties of challenges in the language ranging from poor pronunciation, writing to general grammar rules of the English Language.

A participant stated that *“English Language is the main medium of instruction or language of discourse of this program of international education MA and PHD in this university, and of course I am not a native English speaker although English is a second language in my country. I have had many challenges in the language here using it professionally and academically. For instance, when I wrote the thesis and submitted to the supervisor, she identified many grammatical errors including sentence construction among others. In the class, we could not also communicate well with a few of our classmates due to different backgrounds, some of them were even not from English speaking countries and therefore we had different pronunciations and all these influenced my thesis writing experience”.*

Another participant shared similar challenges about the English language proficiency confirming the situation as a serious barrier to thesis writing and general academic activities among the international students in the Northeast Normal University. *“Yes, English is the medium of instruction in this program and I encounter some problems since it was not the first language in my country. Especially, with grammar in itself, I have had some challenges in writing academic papers since I began studies in this master program at this university. It therefore can be said that, the mastery and proficiency in the language of instruction in an academic program affects the theses writing experiences of international students.*

However, another participant indicated that although her spoken language was average, she still had some difficulty in the academic writing. *Actually, my English was not bad before I came to China. So, I considered it was not a big problem for me but when it comes to academic writing is different and is more difficult and of course there were some mistakes but with the help of the professors and colleagues, I improved my writing skills”,* a participant added.

### **Time allocated for the thesis**

On the issue of time allocated to the thesis writing, more than half of the participants have said that the time allocated (1 year) for the research was not enough as the rests of the participants indicated that the time was enough. The 3 participants stated that, the 1-year duration given to theses writing among international students was quite minimal grounded on the fact that most of the students had no research backgrounds. Many students within the one year of course work were not fully prepared to take up theses writing both professionally and academically. A major experience among all participants was that the one year's period designated for the theses writeup was not enough as student-researchers have to

collect data mostly in their home countries, analyze, reports, and write up the thesis within the one-year's period.

A participant stated that, *“the time allocated for the thesis writing was one year. That one year may not be enough when it comes to data collection. Because if you have selected a topic or an issue related to your home country, you need to go back home to collect the data and that calls for more time. But if somebody selected a topic here in china, may be the time would be enough. Although people can say one year is enough, again it depends on where you are conducting the research. Most of our classmates and I included, prefer to conduct our researches back home. The university required us to finish all the research activities during the one and half months' period of the winter holidays which remains a challenge”*. *“I think the time allocated for the thesis writing was not enough and therefore I believe more time would have been allocated. For example, I went to my home country for the data collection for a duration of three months, but that time was not enough to collect the data. After collecting the data again there was no enough time for the data analyses. This made the time very limited”*, another participant lamented.

For those who said the time allocated for the research was enough, they had their own explanations. *Master degree takes two years. First year they take all the courses and the second year they write their theses. “I think one year is very much enough for the master thesis because for bachelor degree I didn't have any specific special time to write my thesis and I did just three months before I graduated. And here, a whole year is a plenty of time. Yes, for me the time is enough because we completed our course in just one year, first semester and second semester. Then the research was one year so for me it was ok, it was enough that I have managed my time to collect data and completed my thesis”* two participants indicated.

### **Technology-related skills in writing research**

Technology-related skills which may constitute mainly the operation of data analysis software such as the SPSS used in the data analyses procedures in quantitative studies was also found to influence the theses writing successes among international students. Participants shared similar views about their inadequate data analysis skills relating to the SPSS software in the theses writing process among the international students investigated. *“Ok, when I came here I never knew anything about computers and data analysis software before especially the SPSS. I met these technologies here. Advanced studies in research especially at the master level required of students, higher analysis strategies which is proficient in quantitative studies. Theses rooted in quantitative projects required of students to use the data analysis software proficiently. Even terms of the ordinary computer, ha, ha, ha, I am just bad at it. I am not good in computer skills and that becomes an issue because typing the thesis together using the laptop is rare. I sometimes have to pay for commercial typewriters to type up aspects of my thesis. These experiences hinder the success of theses writing processes among in the international students”,* a participant stated.

### **Financial ability**

Lack of financial assistance in theses writing process among international students was one of the major experiences stressed among the international students investigated. The international students shared similar views that it was difficult to access funds to finance their research process especially when it comes to data collection. Some expressed the fact that when they needed to go home to collect data, it is difficult to get financial assistance from anywhere to support their travel expenses and even their data collection process. *“Accessing research funds and grants is also another concern and it is an area where we need a lot of assistance. In this university we are*

*not given research grants like they do in some other universities in the west or Europe where university students are given specific amount of money for research purposes only. A student may need to buy air ticket to go home and collect data, so all these activities and lack of research funds has been the major hindrance.*

*We have therefore been moving on a very tight budget. During my last data collection process in my home country, even moving from the area where I stayed to where my participants were far apart let alone organizing focus group discussions and interview meetings. We do spend a lot during the data collection process and the general theses write up process and I think it was necessary that international students get some kinds of theses/dissertation grants. Apart from using funds for data collection, research grants could be used to pay resource personnel in the field to brief students on data analysis procedures and reportage of findings”, a participant stated.*

Other participants indicated that due to inadequate financial assistances and access of grants, they are forced to conduct their studies in China as they cannot travel to their respective countries to collect the data for their study. Controversially, participants stated that although the faculty of arts where theses writing does not require of students much finances like the science students, they expressed concerns that students conducting researches and writing up their theses in the faculty of arts may still require funds to print some previous articles and the theses.

### **Peer assistance in thesis writing research**

All the interviewees have in one way or the other received some assistance from their peers and teachers in the university during the process of theses writing. *“For sure, writing the thesis was not easy for me alone. I therefore sought for and received some assistance from my classmates and other colleagues in the university. For instance, during the process of*

*analyzing the data, I didn't know how to use the SPSS but some other friends did teach me how to use it. Yes, I received assistance from about five to six persons. Included among them were three PhD students and other master degree students in our faculty. The first assistance I got was how to arrange the whole methodology aspect of the theses. I could present a problem but my issue was that I didn't know how to analyze it. I was also not good at statistics so I had to seek assistance from peers and other professors besides my supervisor to enable me complete my theses”.*

Another interviewee mentioned that, “yes, I have received assistance from a lot of people. My classmates have been helping me because as I have already said, I have a problem in English grammar. As such, friends, classmates, peers and professors impacted a lot on my theses. They assisted me in almost all areas of the theses writing process. I think peers and friends also make up key contributors to a successful thesis irrespective of contexts citing my current experiences”.

### **Research seminars**

All the participants who were interviewed in this study admitted that the research seminar conducted at the international program of MA/PHD has been helpful towards their research activities. For instance, participant one had this to say: “*We had research seminars in our program of international education every Friday. It has been helping us because it has been an avenue where we have been able to present our research drafts, topics and other methodological aspects of our research and generally share research ideas. The seminar had really shaped my research skills and believes, I say bravo to the seminar organizers”.*

Tai also appreciated the significance of the research, “*We had some research seminars during Fridays at our faculty of education. These seminars were helpful because as we were able to get some opinions, suggestion and comments regarding our*

*research from the participants. The seminar serves as a podium of academic debates and contention where we share our research ideas and thoughts. Attendants which include professors and students pose lots of queries which help us shape our research focuses. In fact, the seminar has done wonderfully well, it is more educative to us as it is basically research based and allows students to compete for slots to present their research and theses ideas”.*

### **Supervisor’s commitment**

All the participants expressed their joy about the guidance and commitment enjoyed from their supervisors through the insightful comments and critics they receive. *“My supervisor was supportive in my research writing. She has been advising me on what to do with my thesis. I started research here in the university with little knowledge in research writing but she provided me with much guidance and I really appreciate her help”* a student mentioned. Another participant also commended that his supervisor was so helpful in guiding his thesis research; however, he suggested that the supervisors need to spend more time with the students. *“Well, my supervisor has guided me a lot in this research. She pushed me to do more corrections especially during the process of the data analyses. She taught me how to use the APA style and other citations. She has therefore been so helpful in guiding me. However, I would have suggested the supervisors need to spend more time with the students writing their theses”.*

All participants indicated they enjoyed various levels of commitment from their supervisors ranging from personal level to academic level. Some stated that the Chinese professors were friendlier in supervising international students although they have their limitations. Students stated their supervisors were always ready to assist them in whatever form apart from academic needs of international students. A participant mentioned a situation of a supervisor providing comfortability

for him in situations when he lost a relative back home. It is interesting to note such a personal level assistance aside the academic needs of students.

### **Coping Strategies adapted by International Students in their Thesis Writing Process**

The participants interviewed in the study shared similar views on the various strategies that they have used to overcome the challenges of writing the thesis. Different coping strategies were mentioned by the five participants interviewed in this study. In order to manage the challenges encountered during the theses writing process in their master program especially with the issue of technology-related skills, a participant stated he took extra and remedial classes in other departments and sought for assistance from friends, peers, and professors to help him overcome the difficulty by learning and mastering the SPSS software to help him analyze his data for the study. He stated that *“on handling the technology difficulties I am confronted with, taking extra course in statistics was one of the major options considered as I sought help from friends, peers, and professors. The help I received from my friends, peers, and professors amidst the class I took improved my data analysis skills that enabled me to complete successfully my theses. Although still in the writeup process, as I am done with the analysis of the data, I feel a little relaxed”*.

Basically, participants indicated they needed to just readjust the way they do things in order to handle the difficulties they are confronted with in their theses writing process. With regards to inadequate funds and grants to finance their theses writing process, participants indicated they just needed to readjust their budgets and general spending to save some money to help them collect the data and go through the theses writing process successfully. They also stated that even out of school, it is not easy to access small grants for theses especially at the master level, as such, it poses difficulties for

students to complete their theses in time and successfully. A student exclaimed that *“the whole process of theses writing can be frustrating when there is no where to access financial support especially those of us who conducted researches outside of China that required of us to travel out of our study destination. Without the data, then there is no study but that is usually our major problem in research. We can manage others but the data collection process can be challenging. As such, the only way to cope was to cut short my budget and spending to save some money every month when time was approaching for data collection”*.

Finally, on the aspect of time allocation and English Language proficiency, student-researchers indicated they have to manage time as they learn on their own by the help of friends and the internet. The time factor has been challenging to most students, however, they indicated they have to rush sometimes to meet deadlines which may result to making various degrees of errors in theses works.

## **DISCUSSION**

This study investigated international students' experiences in writing thesis in their master degree programs in education. The study revealed various challenges faced by the students while writing their theses. These experiences included low proficiency in English language, lack of research skills, limited time span, inadequate technology-related skills, insufficient financial supports to carry out the research, and supervisor's commitment. Among the experiences identified, some constitute challenges while others were general experiences of student-researchers. The challenges included; low proficiency in English language, lack of research skills, limited time span, inadequate technology-related skills, insufficient financial supports to carry out the research. Especially for low proficiency in the English Language, the medium of instruction of the program, students

with such experiences were luckily to observe negative consequences during their theses writing processes. They may either experience delay in the writeup or difficulties in expressing their focus points in their theses. This may lead to frustrations and withdrawal from programs. This also meant that some students were admitted with very weak English Language backgrounds.

In addition, inadequate technology-related and general research skills experienced by international students during their theses writing process constituted forms of difficulties. This implied that master students of the education program in the university were not adequately prepared technologically and academically in light of research skills to take part in theses writing. On such basis, students are confronted with various levels of difficulties during their theses writing process ranging from grammatical issues to data analysis.

As indicated during the interview sessions that some had issues even with exploring the laptop computers and had to even pay commercial typewriters to type and print theses. Especially the data analysis software; the SPSS which most students had difficulties using which forms a solid foundation for quantitative analysis, it is therefore necessary for students to undertake remedial and extra lessons in other programs just as they stated in their coping strategies to upgrade themselves to complete successfully their theses.

Theses writing comes along with lots of challenges on the side of the students; from personal level challenges to academic levels. Students may need therefore to prepare themselves in all aspects; socially, emotionally, physically, health-wise, etc. before undertaking their theses project. This will enable students to cope satisfactorily with theses projects. They form key parts of academic adjustment and adaptation for mostly international students. However, students indicated that they enjoyed great values of commitment from their supervisors including personal and academic level factors.

Implacably, it can be said that the supervisors of the international students were friendly and came down to the level of students to provide them with all forms of supports to enable them complete their theses. Exhibiting good relations between students and supervisors alone was enough to provide students the emotional confidence to continuously strive to finish their theses writing successfully. As such, they were good observable relations between students and their professors.

Students also shared their adjustment and adaptation strategies that were adopted to overcome such challenging experiences they faced. Students in terms of language proficiency and inadequate technology-related and research skills took extra and remedial classes as well as sought assistance from friends, peers, and professors. Whereas some students also adjusted their budgets and spending to meet data collection and traveling demands, others have to undertake researchers in Mainland China to cope the financial constraints.

This implied that international students have developed in regard to their thesis experiences various adaptation and academic adjustment strategies that enable them to meet general academic demands including basically the theses. It is worth noting that international students have already developed coping strategies to sooth their academic difficulties in their study destinations. This would by far enable them improve their academic and theses performances.

## **CONCLUSION**

The paper investigated international students' thesis experiences and coping strategies in the Northeast Normal University. A sample of 5 master candidates were recruited. Following the data collection and transcription, the analysis revealed that international students in their theses writing process experienced inadequate research skills, technology-

related issues, and financial supports. The study also revealed that international students experienced great value of commitment from their supervisors, assistance from friends, peers, and professors as they also experienced time constraints. The study illustrated that international students developed various adaptation and adjustment strategies including taking of remedial and extra lessons, seeking help from friends, peers, and professors as well as managing their spending and budgets to cope with their theses writing experiences. It was hereby recommended that;

- The postgraduate master degree international students need to acquaint themselves with basic research skills, be proficient in the language of instruction (English), as well as technology-related skills prior to theses writing projects.
- Universities could also provide formal academic adaptation and adjustment programs to educate and guide international students to adapt more easily to their academic environs.

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