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“I Wasn’t Okay, but I Had to Pretend”: The Emotional Toll of Visa Denials and Delays on African International Students *Entering U.S. Higher Education*

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Abstract:

International students often begin their academic journeys long before they arrive on campus. For many students, the path to studying in the United States includes navigating visa interviews, repeated delays, financial sacrifices, and long periods of uncertainty about whether their educational plans will materialize. While research on international student transition often focuses on experiences after students arrive, far less attention has been given to the emotional experiences that occur before arrival. This paper examines the often overlooked psychological and emotional impact of visa denials and prolonged visa delays on international students preparing to begin their studies in U.S. higher education. Drawing on qualitative narratives collected from international students across several African countries, the paper explores how visa uncertainty produces stress, anxiety, and emotional exhaustion even before students enter the classroom. Participants described months of uncertainty, repeated embassy interviews, and financial strain that shaped their emotional readiness for academic life. Many students explained that the pressure to remain strong for their families and communities required them to conceal emotional distress while continuing to pursue their educational goals. The findings suggest that pre-arrival visa experiences do not simply disappear once students reach campus. Instead, the emotional residue of these experiences continues to influence students’ confidence, sense of belonging, and willingness to seek support during the early stages of their academic transition. By bringing attention to these often-invisible experiences, this paper contributes to ongoing conversations about international student support and highlights the need for institutions to recognize the full trajectory of international student transition.

Keywords: pre-arrival stress, student immigration experiences, higher education mobility, transition challenges

1. Introduction

International students often enter U.S. higher education with visible determination and strong academic preparation. However, the journey that brings many students to campus involves months of uncertainty and emotional strain. Visa interviews, repeated denials, financial sacrifices, and long waiting periods can create significant stress before students even begin their academic programs. While universities frequently celebrate the diversity and global perspectives international students bring to campus, the emotional experiences that occur before arrival are rarely acknowledged within research



on international student transition. As a result, an important part of the international student journey remains largely invisible within institutional conversations about student success.

Research on international student transition has traditionally focused on post-arrival experiences, emphasizing sociocultural adjustment, academic challenges, and mental health outcomes (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019; Russell et al., 2010). However, the pre-arrival period remains largely absent from scholarly discussion. Visa denials, extended administrative delays, and unpredictable consular decisions create a climate of chronic uncertainty, fear, and emotional distress for many aspiring students. For individuals from low-income backgrounds or politically unstable contexts, the consequences are particularly severe. Each visa denial may involve significant financial loss, social embarrassment, disrupted academic timelines, and emotional exhaustion.

Importantly, these experiences do not simply end once a visa is granted. Unresolved visa-related stress often becomes part of students' emotional baggage, influencing confidence, sense of belonging, and help-seeking behavior during the first-year of study. Existing research suggests that emotional instability and uncertainty can weaken academic engagement and undermine students' ability to form supportive relationships on campus (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Pineda et al., 2022). Yet, despite growing attention to international student well-being, no studies have explicitly examined how visa-related experiences prior to arrival contribute to these early transition challenges.

To better understand this overlooked dimension of international student mobility, this study examines how visa denials and prolonged visa delays shape international students' emotional experiences before arrival. The study addresses the following research question: How do visa denials and extended visa delays influence international students' emotional well-being, confidence, and transition into their first-year of study in U.S. higher education? By centering students' narratives, the paper seeks to illuminate how pre-arrival experiences continue to influence students' adjustment and academic engagement after they arrive on campus.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Pre-arrival challenges: visa denials, delays, and immigration stress

Research on international students has traditionally emphasized post-arrival experiences, while challenges occurring before entry into the host country have received far less scholarly attention. One of the most overlooked aspects of this pre-arrival phase is the visa application process. Visa procedures often involve prolonged administrative delays, repeated denials, unexpected financial demands, and emotionally intense interviews. Migration stress research suggests that uncertainty prior to relocation significantly increases anxiety and emotional strain (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). However, this analytical framework has rarely been applied to international students navigating immigration systems while preparing to study abroad.

Global mobility trends underscore the importance of examining this issue more closely. According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics reported by the Migration Data Portal, the number of internationally mobile students increased from approximately 2.5 million in 2002 to nearly 6.9 million in 2022. In 2022, roughly 3.4 million internationally mobile students were male, and about 3 million were female, reflecting sustained expansion in global student mobility. As the international student movement continues to grow, increasing numbers of students must navigate complex immigration



systems that directly determine their ability to access higher education opportunities, particularly in major host countries such as the United States.

Visa denials and prolonged delays are frequently accompanied by emotional consequences, including financial, shame, fear of failure, disruption of academic timelines, and pressure to conceal distress from loss family members (Choi, 2021; Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). These stressors occur before students arrive on campus, yet they can shape expectations, emotional readiness, and confidence during transition. Prior research indicates that prolonged uncertainty before relocation can negatively influence later adjustment and psychological well-being (Yan & Berliner, 2013). Students who endure extended periods of emotional strain may begin their academic journeys with reduced confidence and diminished perceptions of personal control.

It is also important to distinguish between stress and trauma within this context. While stress refers to emotional strain resulting from challenging or uncertain circumstances, trauma typically involves deeper psychological disruption that may produce longer-lasting emotional consequences (American Psychological Association, 2022). Not all stressful experiences result in trauma. However, repeated visa denials, prolonged administrative processing, and the perceived loss of educational opportunity may intensify emotional stress in ways that resemble traumatic experiences for some students. Despite these potential consequences, visa-related emotional distress remains largely absent from international student scholarship. This gap highlights the need to examine how pre-arrival and struggles influence students' well-being and early transition experiences in higher education, particularly within the United States context.

2.2 Sociocultural challenges

Sociocultural challenges remain among the most frequently documented barriers international students encounter in host countries. These challenges include loneliness, limited access to social support, cultural misunderstandings, and difficulties navigating unfamiliar social norms (Cowley & Hyams Ssekasi, 2018; Shah et al., 2019). Research indicates that stress levels among international students are often highest during the first and second years following arrival, when students are adjusting to new cultural environments and academic expectations (Kristiana et al., 2022).

In addition to anticipated challenges such as homesickness and language adjustment, international students frequently encounter discrimination, racism, and stereotyping in host societies (Brown & Jones, 2013; Ge et al., 2019). These experiences can hinder long-term adjustment and intensify emotional distress. Many students rely heavily on co-national or ethnic networks due to difficulties forming relationships with domestic students, which may further limit opportunities for broader social integration (Elturki et al., 2019; Jenkins & Galloway, 2009).

Language related stress further complicates sociocultural adjustment. In English speaking contexts such as the United States, accent based stereotyping and linguistic discrimination have been associated with increased anxiety, reduced social confidence, and challenges integrating both academically and socially (Dovchin, 2020). These experiences can shape students' willingness to participate in classroom discussions, engage in social interactions, and seek institutional support.

2.3 Academic challenges

Academic adjustment challenges are also widely documented within international student literature. Students often encounter unfamiliar teaching styles, curriculum expectations, assessment practices, and communication norms when interacting with faculty and peers (Alavi & Mansor, 2011). The first-year of study can be particularly demanding because students must simultaneously navigate academic expectations while adapting to a new cultural and social environment (Burdett & Crossman, 2012).

Language barriers remain a significant predictor of academic difficulty. Even students who meet standardized English proficiency requirements frequently report challenges with speaking, listening comprehension, and understanding diverse accents in academic settings (Park et al., 2017). Fear of misunderstanding course material or appearing academically unprepared can lead students to avoid classroom participation or delay seeking academic support (Sherry et al., 2010).

Students studying in non-English-speaking host countries face additional challenges related to language acquisition prior to full academic engagement. Research indicates that language learning demands can delay academic integration and increase feelings of academic insecurity (Ibragimova & Tarasova, 2018). These challenges highlight the complexity of international students' academic transitions.

2.4 Psychological challenges

Growing global attention has focused on international students' mental health and psychological well-being (Busfield, 2012; Forbes Mewett, 2018). Common psychological concerns reported in the literature include homesickness, anxiety, depression, and heightened stress during cultural transition (Russell et al., 2010; Sun et al., 2021). Several studies suggest that international students may experience higher levels of psychological distress than domestic students due to multiple simultaneous adjustment demands (Furnham & Trezise, 1983; Sun & Eide, 1991; Lu, 1990).

Language discrimination and cultural marginalization have also been associated with feelings of inferiority, social withdrawal, and diminished self-esteem among international students (Dovchin, 2020). Cultural stigma surrounding mental health further complicates help-seeking behaviors. In many cultural contexts, discussing emotional distress openly may be discouraged, leading students to avoid institutional counseling services or manage challenges privately (Gan & Forbes Mewett, 2019).

Although psychological challenges following arrival have been extensively documented, the role of pre-arrival stressors such as visa denials, prolonged delays, and immigration uncertainty remains insufficiently explored. Understanding these earlier emotional experiences is necessary for developing a more comprehensive view of international student well-being.

2.5 Economic challenges

International students make substantial economic contributions to host countries and higher education systems. In the United States, international students contributed approximately 45 billion dollars to the national economy in 2018 and 41 billion dollars in 2019 through tuition payments and living expenses (NAFSA, 2019). Many higher education systems rely heavily on international student tuition revenue as part of institutional funding structures (Van Damme, 2017).



Despite these contributions, international students often face significant financial challenges. Tuition fees for international students are typically considerably higher than those paid by domestic students, and living expenses can be unpredictable and financially burdensome (Shah et al., 2019; Newsome & Cooper, 2016). Many students depend on family financial support, which may involve substantial sacrifices or economic instability within their households (Institute of International Education, 2019).

Financial strain can intensify emotional stress and negatively influence students' academic engagement and well-being. When financial challenges occur alongside immigration uncertainties such as visa denials or delays, the resulting pressures may further complicate students' transition into higher education.

3. Identified Gaps in the Literature

Across the reviewed scholarship, three critical gaps emerge.

First, limited research addresses the emotional and psychological consequences of visa denials and prolonged visa delays experienced by international students prior to arrival in host countries.

Second, relatively few studies connect pre-arrival visa-related stress to first-year adjustment outcomes such as academic engagement, mental health, and sense of belonging within host institutions.

Third, international student research overwhelmingly emphasizes post-arrival experiences, often overlooking the emotional conditions that shape students' readiness for transition before they enter the host country.

Addressing these gaps is necessary to develop a more comprehensive understanding of international student transition processes. By examining visa-related challenges alongside early adjustment experiences, this paper contributes to emerging scholarship that recognizes international student mobility as a continuous process shaped by both pre-arrival and post-arrival experiences.

3.1 Purpose of this study

This paper addresses the gaps identified in the existing literature by examining how visa denials and prolonged visa delays influence the emotional well-being and transition experiences of international students entering universities in the United States. While previous scholarship has largely focused on post-arrival adjustment, far less attention has been given to the experiences that occur before students reach their host institutions. As a result, the emotional and psychological consequences of visa-related uncertainty remain insufficiently understood within international student research.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how pre-arrival immigration challenges shape students' early transition experiences during their first-year of study. This research examines how visa denials and prolonged visa delays influence students' confidence, sense of belonging, readiness for academic engagement, and overall adjustment within U.S. higher education institutions.

To guide this investigation, the study addresses the following research question:

How does pre-arrival visa-related stress influence international students' confidence, sense of belonging, academic readiness, and first-year adjustment in U.S. universities?

By focusing on the emotional and transitional consequences of visa-related challenges, this paper contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of international student mobility. Rather than



examining pre-arrival and post-arrival experiences as separate phases, this study considers how early immigration-related stress may shape students' adjustment trajectories during their first-year in U.S. higher education.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research design

This paper employs a qualitative narrative inquiry approach to explore how international students interpret and make meaning of visa denials and prolonged administrative delays and how these pre-arrival experiences shaped their transition into U.S. higher education. Narrative inquiry is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows researchers to examine how individuals construct meaning through personal stories and lived experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Visa challenges often involve complex emotional experiences that unfold over time, including uncertainty, disappointment, and hope. Understanding these experiences requires attention to how students narrate and interpret their journeys rather than relying solely on structured numerical measures.

Narrative inquiry also enables the researcher to examine how past experiences influence present perceptions and future expectations. In the context of international student mobility, visa-related challenges occur before students physically arrive in the host country, yet these experiences may shape confidence, belonging, and academic readiness during the first-year of study. By focusing on participants' narratives, this study seeks to understand how visa-related stress becomes embedded in students' broader educational trajectories.

4.2 Participants

Participants were thirty African international students studying at U.S. institutions, including large public universities, mid-sized private institutions, and regional campuses. The sample included both undergraduate and graduate students. Some participants were in their first-year of study, while others were in later or final years but selected retrospectively on their initial transition experiences.

All participants had experienced at least one significant disruption during the visa process. These disruptions included visa denial, extended administrative processing, severe interview appointment delays, or repeated rescheduling of visa interviews that affected academic timelines. Although not all participants were currently in their first-year of study, their narratives focused specifically on the period surrounding their arrival and early adjustment. Prior research identifies this stage as a critical period for academic engagement, belonging, and help-seeking behavior among international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

4.3 Sampling technique

A purposive sampling approach was used to recruit participants who had firsthand experience with pre-arrival visa challenges. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when the goal is to identify participants who possess rich experiences relevant to the research question (Patton, 2015).

Participants were recruited through international student networks, WhatsApp groups, campus cultural associations, and personal referrals. Eligibility criteria required participants to be African international students currently studying at a U.S. institution, to have applied for an F-1 visa within the



previous three years, and to have experienced at least one significant visa-related challenge. These challenges included visa denial, administrative processing delays, difficulty securing interview appointments, or traveling to another country to obtain a visa interview.

Snowball sampling also occurred naturally during recruitment, as several participants referred peers who had undergone similar visa-related experiences. This process helped identify individuals who had experienced emotionally significant visa challenges that aligned closely with the purpose of the study.

4.4 Data collection

Data were collected using two qualitative methods: semi-structured narrative interviews and an open-ended online survey. Using multiple forms of data collection allowed participants to share experiences in ways that felt most comfortable to them while also strengthening the richness of the dataset.

Individual interviews were conducted through Zoom and lasted approximately forty-five to sixty minutes. The interviews followed a semi-structured format that allowed participants to narrate their visa journeys chronologically while also responding to guiding prompts. Participants were invited to describe their experiences beginning with their decision to study abroad, followed by the visa application process, and ending with their arrival and early academic transition. Interview questions explored emotional reactions, financial pressures, family expectations, and the ways visa challenges influenced participants' confidence and academic preparedness during their first semester.

In addition to interviews, an anonymous open-ended online survey was distributed to participants who preferred to write about particularly sensitive experiences. The survey included reflective prompts that encouraged participants to describe visa-related stress, emotional reactions to delays or denials, and the ways these experiences shaped their expectations about studying in the United States. Combining interviews and written responses allowed the study to capture both detailed narratives and reflections that participants may have found easier to express in writing.

4.5 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, and survey responses were compiled into a single dataset. The analysis followed a multistage process.

First, the researcher read through all transcripts and responses multiple times to develop familiarity with the data. During this phase, notes were taken to identify emotionally significant moments in participants' narratives.

Second, initial codes were generated to capture recurring ideas and emotional patterns within the narratives. These codes included experiences such as fear of rejection, shame surrounding visa denial, pressure to appear resilient, emotional exhaustion during administrative processing, and relief following visa approval.

Third, related codes were grouped into broader thematic categories. Through iterative comparison across participant accounts, four major themes emerged:

1. The emotional shock and psychological strain associated with visa denials and delays

2. Silence and shame surrounding visa experiences and family expectations
3. A vulnerable and disrupted first semester transition
4. Ongoing financial pressure and family responsibility during academic adjustment

Themes were refined and organized to ensure that they accurately represented patterns across participants' experiences.

4.6 Trustworthiness and rigor

Several strategies were used to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. First, the researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the research process to reflect on personal assumptions and monitor how prior experiences might influence interpretation of the data.

Second, member checking was conducted with a subset of participants. Brief summaries of emerging themes were shared with participants to confirm that the interpretations accurately reflected their experiences.

Third, triangulation was achieved by comparing insights obtained from both interviews and survey responses. Using multiple data sources helped strengthen the consistency and credibility of the findings.

Finally, thick description was used when presenting participant narratives to provide sufficient contextual detail about the social and institutional environment surrounding participants' experiences. This approach allows readers to better understand the circumstances shaping participants' stories.

4.7 Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations were central to the study design. All participants were assigned pseudonyms and identifying details such as institutional names or specific immigration information were removed or generalized to protect confidentiality.

Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question, pause the interview, or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Because visa experiences can be emotionally sensitive, the interviews followed a trauma-informed approach that emphasized empathy, emotional awareness, and participant comfort. When appropriate, participants were encouraged to seek support from campus counseling services if discussing past experiences resurfaced distress.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained prior to the start of data collection. The researcher's positionality as an international student who has navigated similar visa processes was acknowledged throughout the research process. Reflexive journaling, peer consultation, and careful grounding of interpretations in the data were used to ensure that participants' voices remained central to the analysis.

5. Participant Demographics

Thirty international students participated in this study, representing a diverse cross-section of West, East, and Southern Africa. The largest proportion of participants were from Ghana and Nigeria, reflecting the strong representation of students from these countries within U.S. higher education institutions. Additional participants came from Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia, Kenya, Ethiopia,



Uganda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. This geographic diversity provided a range of perspectives on visa-related experiences and transition processes across different national contexts.

Most participants were enrolled in master's degree programs, while a smaller number were pursuing undergraduate or doctoral studies. Participants ranged in age from their early twenties to early thirties. Academic disciplines varied across the sample, although many participants were studying in fields such as STEM, business, social sciences, and education. These fields reflect areas where international student enrollment in U.S. institutions is particularly strong (Institute of International Education, 2023).

All participants had applied for an F-1 student visa within the past three years. Each participant reported experiencing at least one significant visa-related challenge during the application process. These challenges included visa denial, extended administrative processing, prolonged interview appointment delays, or the need to travel to another country to secure a visa interview.

This demographic distribution provided a meaningful basis for examining how visa-related challenges shape the early transition experiences of international students entering U.S. higher education. The diversity of national backgrounds and academic programs also allowed the study to identify both shared emotional patterns and variations in how students interpreted and responded to visa-related uncertainty before arrival.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Characteristics

Characteristics	Categories	Count (n = 30)
Region of Origin	West Africa (Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia)	18
	East Africa (Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda)	7
	South Africa (South Africa, Zimbabwe)	5
Academic Level	Master's	22
	Undergraduate	4
	Doctoral	4
Visa Challenges Experienced	Visa Denial	12
	Administrative Processing	8
	Long delays in appointment availability	15
	Travel to another country for an interview.	5
Visa Attempt	One attempt	8
	Two attempts	10
	Three or more attempts	12

Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 30)

Note. Participants could report more than one type of visa challenge.



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6. Findings

The narratives of the thirty participants, all international students from West, East, and Southern Africa, revealed a layered emotional journey that began long before their arrival in the United States. Students from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Gambia, Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, South Africa, and Zimbabwe described experiences that included visa denials, prolonged administrative delays, repeated interview attempts, and costly travel to embassies both within and outside their home countries.

Across the narratives, participants consistently emphasized that the visa process was not simply an administrative requirement but a prolonged emotional experience that shaped how they understood opportunity, personal worth, and readiness for academic life in the United States. Rather than beginning their studies from a neutral starting point, many students described arriving on campus already carrying emotional exhaustion, financial pressure, and lingering anxiety from the immigration process.

Four interconnected themes emerged from the analysis: the emotional shock of the visa process, silence and shame surrounding visa experiences, a vulnerable and disrupted first semester transition, and the ongoing financial burden accompanied by strong family expectations.

6.1 The shock and emotional trauma of the visa process

Across participants' narratives, the visa process emerged as one of the most emotionally destabilizing stages of their educational journey. Rather than experiencing visa interviews as routine administrative procedures, students frequently described them as moments of intense vulnerability in which their educational futures depended on brief interactions with immigration officials.

Participants who experienced visa denials often described the moment of refusal as emotionally devastating. One Nigerian student explained:

“When the officer said I was refused, again, I felt like something in me broke.”

This statement reflected more than disappointment. For the participant, the denial represented the collapse of years of planning, family investment, and personal ambition. Similarly, a Ghanaian participant described leaving the interview feeling disoriented and emotionally numb, explaining that months of preparation suddenly appeared meaningless after the refusal.

Students who were placed in prolonged administrative processing described a different form of distress characterized by uncertainty and suspended life planning. As one Kenyan participant explained:

“For almost three months, my whole life froze. I couldn't plan anything.”

This uncertainty created emotional strain that extended beyond the visa process itself. Participants described delaying housing arrangements, deferring academic preparation, and constantly monitoring visa status updates while fearing the possibility of missing their academic start dates.

For several West African students, emotional strain was intensified by the need to travel to other countries to secure visa interview appointments. Students described traveling to locations such as Senegal, South Africa, and Guinea when appointment availability in their home countries was limited. These journeys often required borrowing money or drawing heavily from family resources.

A student from Sierra Leone explained:

“I had borrowed money to travel for the interview. When they denied me again, it felt like failing twice, at home and abroad.”

The financial and emotional stakes of these journeys heightened the sense of personal failure associated with visa refusal. Participants often interpreted the denial not only as an immigration decision but also as a personal rejection.

Importantly, the emotional impact of these experiences did not end once a visa was eventually approved. Several participants described lingering anxiety and disbelief even after receiving their visas. A Zimbabwean participant reflected:

“Even when the visa was approved, the fear stayed in my body.”

For many students, this lingering anxiety shaped their early transition experiences. Rather than arriving with excitement and confidence, participants described entering their academic programs while still processing the emotional aftermath of the visa process.

6.2 Silence, shame, and emotional invisibility

A second dominant theme that emerged from participants' narratives was the silence and shame surrounding visa struggles. Many students described intentionally concealing their experiences from family members and community networks to avoid disappointment or social judgment.

For some participants, silence functioned as a protective strategy. Several students reported attending visa interviews or traveling abroad for appointments without informing their families. A Ghanaian participant explained:

“I did not tell my parents I was going for the interview. I didn't want them waiting and praying only for me to return with a refusal.”

Participants described this secrecy as emotionally isolating. By attempting to shield their families from disappointment, students often navigated the emotional weight of visa uncertainty alone.

Others described avoiding communication with relatives following visa denials. One participant recalled remaining silent for several days after a refusal because they could not find the words to explain the outcome to family members who had supported their educational aspirations.

For students who traveled internationally for interviews, feelings of shame were intensified when they returned home without approval. One participant described crying alone in an airport restroom after receiving a visa denial, explaining that the experience felt like a public confirmation that they had failed their family's expectations.

These patterns of silence and emotional invisibility continued even after participants arrived in the United States. Many students reported masking emotional exhaustion during orientation programs and early academic interactions. A Ugandan participant explained:

“People saw me smiling, but inside I was still hurting.”

In classroom environments, this emotional concealment often translated into hesitation to participate or ask questions. One Ethiopian student described experiencing intense anxiety during classroom discussions:



“When the professor asked a question, my heart raced like I was back in the embassy.”

For this participant, classroom participation triggered memories of visa interviews, which were also experienced as evaluative interactions where one’s future depended on the response to a question. These connections illustrate how emotional experiences from the visa process continued to influence students’ academic confidence.

6.3 A vulnerable and disrupted first semester transition

Participants consistently described the first semester as an especially fragile period of adjustment. Many students arrived on campus emotionally depleted and financially strained after navigating months of uncertainty during the visa process.

Visa delays caused several students to arrive late to campus, sometimes missing orientation programs or beginning courses weeks after the semester had started. A Ghanaian participant described this experience by stating:

“I felt like someone entering a race that had already started.”

Late arrival created feelings of academic disadvantage and social disconnection. Students described struggling to catch up with coursework while simultaneously attempting to build friendships and navigate unfamiliar academic expectations.

Even participants who arrived before the start of classes reported lingering emotional preoccupation with their visa experiences. Several students described difficulty concentrating during lectures because intrusive thoughts about past visa interviews or potential future immigration problems continued to occupy their attention.

Classroom participation was also affected. Participants frequently associated speaking in class with the same sense of evaluation and scrutiny that they had experienced during visa interviews. As a result, some students reported avoiding classroom discussions or delaying interactions with professors.

Social adjustment was similarly affected. Many participants described withdrawing from social activities or struggling to build friendships during their first months on campus. One participant summarized this experience by stating:

“I arrived tired. I arrived scared. I arrived still hurting.”

Financial strain further intensified the vulnerability of the first semester transition. Many participants carried debts related to visa applications, travel expenses, and repeated interview attempts. One Nigerian participant explained:

“I was improving my GPA, but my mind was calculating how my parents were paying off loans.”

Although some participants eventually described moments of emotional rebuilding through supportive friendships or encouraging faculty interactions, the findings indicate that students were navigating academic transition while simultaneously recovering from emotionally taxing immigration experiences.

6.4 Financial burden and weight of family expectations

The final theme centered on the financial burden and family expectations that persisted long after visa approval. Participants described draining family savings, borrowing extensively, and accumulating debt because of repeated visa applications, international travel, and associated immigration expenses.

Students from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Kenya described the financial demands of securing visa interviews and traveling internationally when local appointments were unavailable. One Ghanaian participant reported spending nearly thirty thousand Ghanaian cedis on travel related to visa interviews. Reflecting on the experience, the participant stated:

“When I got denied again, it felt like my family had wasted everything on me.”

Upon arrival in the United States, this financial pressure often transformed into a continuing psychological burden. Participants described feeling responsible for repaying debts and supporting family members despite the high cost of living associated with studying abroad.

Family expectations intensified these pressures. Many participants described being viewed as collective investments or symbols of future economic stability within their households. A Nigerian participant explained:

“My father told me, ‘You are our future now.’ So, I felt I had no right to complain.”

These expectations shaped how students interpreted academic challenges. Several participants described experiencing guilt following minor academic setbacks, interpreting these difficulties as failures that betrayed their families’ sacrifices.

As a result, participants often described balancing academic responsibilities with persistent emotional connections to obligations at home. Students reported being physically present in classrooms while emotionally preoccupied with family expectations, financial repayment, and the pressure to succeed.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that the visa process functions not merely as an administrative requirement for African international students but as a significant pre-arrival stressor that shapes emotional well-being, academic engagement, and social transition into U.S. higher education. Participants’ narratives revealed that visa denials, prolonged administrative delays, financial strain, and the expectation to remain resilient collectively created emotional strain that often continued even after visa approval. While these experiences align with existing scholarship on migration stress and acculturative stress, this study contributes to the literature by highlighting a stage of the international student journey that has received limited scholarly attention: the emotional consequences of immigration processes before arrival.

Rather than suggesting that pre-arrival experiences are more important than post-arrival challenges, the findings indicate that these phases are closely interconnected. The emotional and financial pressures experienced during the visa process often influenced how students approached their academic and social transition during the first semester. In this way, the findings suggest that international student

adjustment should be understood as a continuous process shaped by both pre-migration and post-arrival experiences.

7.1 Pre-arrival stress and migration experiences

Migration research has long suggested that emotional disruption prior to relocation can influence post-arrival mental health outcomes (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). The narratives in this study reflected similar patterns. Participants described visa encounters as emotionally intense experiences that generated uncertainty, anxiety, and self-doubt. These emotional responses frequently persisted even after visa approval, influencing students' early academic confidence and sense of security.

These findings align with Yan and Berliner's (2013) work on migration-related stress, which demonstrates that unresolved stress before relocation can increase vulnerability during later adjustment. However, the experiences described in this study differ from many traditional migration stressors. While much migration literature focuses on displacement caused by conflict or forced relocation, the stress described by participants emerged from bureaucratic systems, repeated evaluation of worthiness during visa interviews, and the financial risks associated with international travel for appointments.

These findings suggest that visa-related uncertainty may represent a distinct category of migration-related stress within international student mobility.

7.2 Transition frameworks and depleted resources

Schlossberg's transition theory emphasizes the importance of personal resources, social support, and coping strategies during periods of life transition (Schlossberg et al., 1995). According to this framework, individuals' ability to manage change depends on the balance between available resources and the demands created by the transition.

Participants in this study often entered U.S. higher education with limited emotional and financial resources due to prolonged visa uncertainty. Months of waiting, repeated interviews, and financial sacrifices frequently left students feeling exhausted before their academic programs even began. As a result, some students reported beginning their first semester with reduced confidence, heightened anxiety, and diminished capacity to engage socially or academically.

These findings extend Schlossberg's model by illustrating how bureaucratic processes occurring before arrival may weaken the internal and external resources students rely on during adjustment. Rather than entering the transition with stable support systems and emotional readiness, many participants described beginning their academic journeys while still recovering from earlier stress.

7.3 Acculturative stress and emotional invisibility

Participants' narratives also reflected patterns commonly associated with acculturative stress. Previous research has shown that international students may experience identity threat, social isolation, and fear of judgment when navigating unfamiliar cultural and academic environments (Dovchin, 2020). The silence and shame described by participants in this study echo these dynamics.

Several students described concealing visa denials or delays from family members and peers to avoid appearing unsuccessful. This tendency toward emotional concealment often continued after arrival in

the United States. Participants reported masking stress during orientation, avoiding classroom participation, or hesitating to seek academic support.

These patterns resemble what Dovchin (2020) describes as emotional invisibility, where individuals suppress vulnerability to maintain social acceptance. In the context of this study, visa-related experiences appeared to intensify existing acculturative stressors. The emotional strain associated with immigration processes often intersected with challenges related to language use, classroom participation, and cultural adjustment.

Importantly, these findings suggest that emotional stress does not necessarily begin after arrival. Instead, the transition into U.S. higher education may already be shaped by earlier immigration experiences.

7.4 First-year adjustment in U.S. higher education

Research on first-year student adjustment in U.S. higher education often highlights the importance of academic engagement, social belonging, and psychological well-being as foundations for student success. The narratives in this study indicate that visa-related challenges may influence each of these domains.

Participants described arriving emotionally fatigued, socially cautious, and financially burdened. For students who experienced visa delays, late arrival further complicated adjustment by limiting opportunities to attend orientation programs or establish early social connections. Fear of evaluation during classroom discussions also reduced participation and help-seeking behaviors.

These patterns should not be interpreted as indicators of disengagement. Instead, they reflect the emotional consequences of immigration experiences that preceded arrival. When viewed through this lens, hesitation in classroom participation or social interaction may represent lingering uncertainty rather than lack of motivation.

7.5 Implications for international student research and practice

International student research has historically focused on challenges that occur after students arrive in host countries. The findings of this study suggest that the visa process represents an important stage in the international student experience that warrants greater scholarly attention.

Recognizing the emotional impact of visa-related stress can help institutions better understand why some international students appear withdrawn, hesitant, or overwhelmed during their first semester. These behaviors may reflect earlier immigration experiences rather than limited academic preparation or motivation.

Institutions may benefit from integrating awareness of visa-related stress into orientation programs, advising practices, and mental health outreach initiatives. Faculty and advisers can also be encouraged to interpret silence or hesitation in classroom settings with greater cultural and emotional sensitivity.

International student offices and counseling services may further strengthen support systems by developing culturally responsive approaches that acknowledge the financial sacrifices, family expectations, and emotional pressures often associated with studying abroad. Recognizing the full trajectory of international student experiences may ultimately lead to more effective institutional support and improved student well-being.



8. Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that international student support structures in U.S. higher education can be strengthened by recognizing the emotional and financial pressures that may occur before students arrive on campus. Visa denials, prolonged administrative processing, and financial sacrifices created forms of pre-arrival stress that shaped participants' early transition experiences. The following recommendations outline practical strategies that institutions may adopt to better support international students during both the pre-arrival period and the early stages of adjustment.

First, universities should expand pre-arrival engagement efforts to include emotional preparation in addition to procedural guidance. While many institutions provide information about visa requirements and travel logistics, fewer address the emotional uncertainty that students may experience during the immigration process. Virtual pre-arrival sessions facilitated by international advisers, counselors, or trained peer mentors could provide students with opportunities to discuss common stressors, financial expectations, and adjustment challenges. Such sessions may also foster early community building among incoming students before they arrive in the United States.

Second, orientation programs should include structured opportunities for reflection and peer connection. Many participants in this study described arriving on campus while still processing the emotional impact of visa delays or denials. Orientation activities that encourage open dialogue about pre-arrival experiences may help normalize these challenges and reduce feelings of isolation. Facilitated peer discussions, storytelling sessions, or small group conversations could provide students with supportive spaces to share experiences and build trust with peers.

Faculty members also play an important role in shaping students' early academic experiences. Institutions may benefit from offering faculty development opportunities that increase awareness of how immigration-related stress and cultural expectations may influence classroom participation and help-seeking behavior. Simple instructional practices such as low-stakes participation activities, early semester check-ins, and transparent communication about academic expectations may reduce anxiety for students who associate authority figures with high-stakes evaluation.

In addition, international student offices should consider implementing early semester check-in programs, particularly for students who arrive late due to visa delays. These meetings could provide opportunities to review missed orientation materials, discuss academic adjustments, and connect students with campus resources. Institutions may also explore expanding access to emergency financial assistance programs and culturally responsive financial wellness workshops that acknowledge family financial contributions and international cost burdens.

Mental health services should also be responsive to the cultural and emotional realities described by participants. Counseling centers can strengthen outreach by emphasizing confidentiality, cultural understanding, and the normalcy of seeking support during periods of adjustment. Partnerships with counselors who possess intercultural expertise or familiarity with African student communities may further improve trust and utilization of mental health services.

Peer support networks represent another valuable resource. Institutions may consider training international student mentors, graduate assistants, or living-learning community leaders to recognize signs of immigration-related stress and adjustment challenges. Informal peer support spaces such as

discussion groups, mentoring programs, or community gatherings may provide accessible opportunities for connection and emotional reassurance.

Finally, universities may consider adopting flexible academic policies that acknowledge the reality of visa-related delays. Temporary remote participation options, extended assignment deadlines, or modular orientation programs may help reduce early academic pressure for students who arrive after the semester begins. Providing clearer communication about visa timelines and possible delays may also help students prepare more realistically for the transition into U.S. higher education.

Together, these strategies encourage institutions to view international student adjustment as a process that begins before arrival and continues throughout the first-year. By acknowledging the full trajectory of international student experiences, universities can develop more responsive and supportive environments that promote both well-being and academic success.

9. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the visa process constitutes a significant and often-invisible source of emotional, financial, and psychological stress for African international students entering U.S. higher education. Students do not arrive as blank slates but carry the weight of delays, prolonged uncertainty, financial sacrifice, and family expectations into their academic and social transitions. These pre-arrival experiences shape classroom engagement, help-seeking behaviors, social connection, and overall sense of belonging.

By centering the lived experiences of students from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Kenya, and other African countries, this study addresses a critical gap in international student research. It highlights pre-arrival trauma as a foundational component of the transition and calls for more holistic, culturally responsive approaches to international student support. Effective support requires institutions to recognize not only academic adjustment but also the emotional and financial realities that accompany students long before they arrive on campus.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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