International and Refugee Students' Success at Cornell

GOVT 6109: Field Methods

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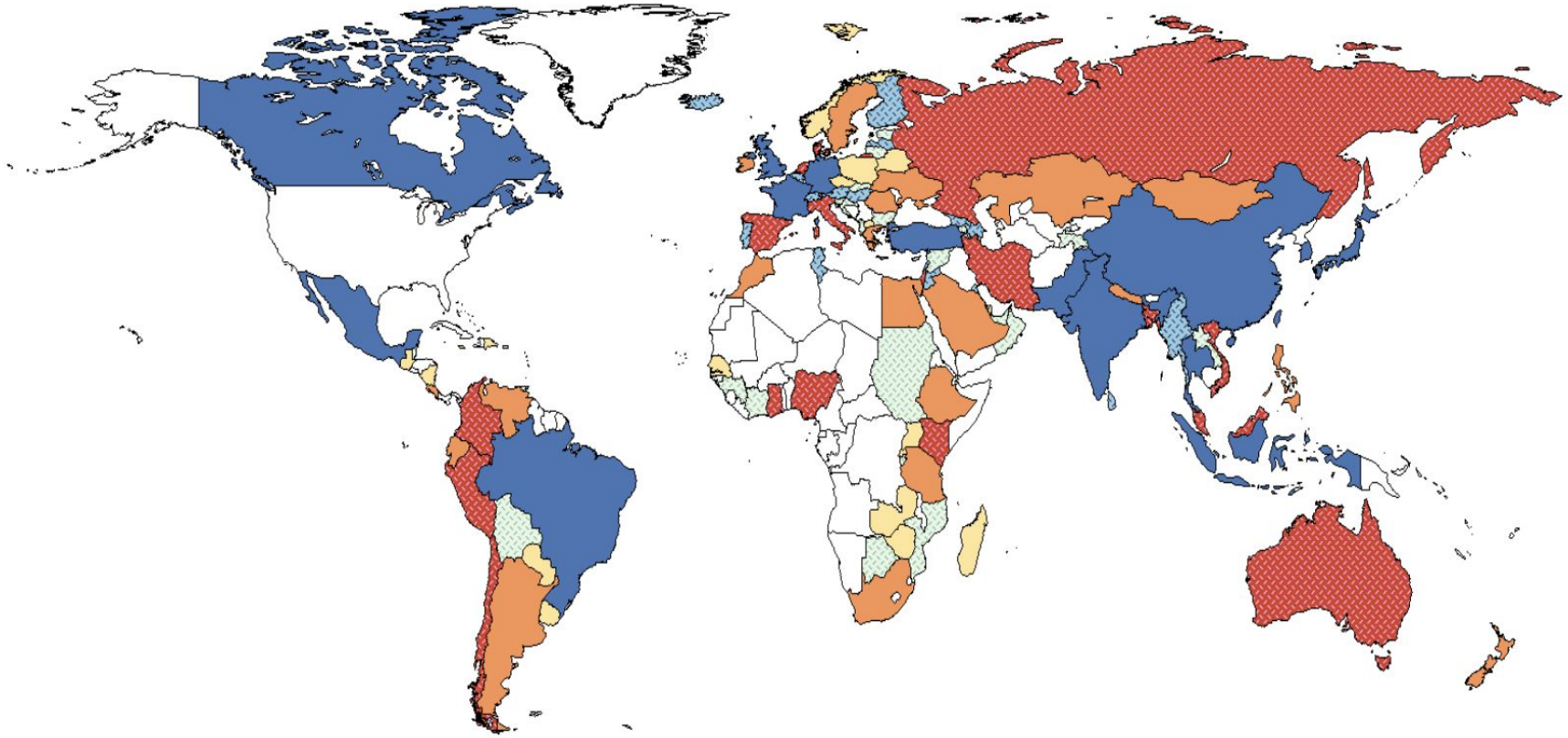


Source: Cornell Office of Global Learning

Research Question

Under what conditions do international and refugee students integrate successfully in institutions of higher education?



Theory and Observable Implications



International students have agency in their decision to seek higher education abroad.

- The problems they face may be tied to this “inter-national” status (e.g., visa, language differences)

Refugee students are defined by a lack of agency—circumstances outside their control have for the most part forced them from their home countries.

- The problems they face may include those of international students, but they also face *trauma* from war and persecution which led to their refugee status.

Research Design



We consider the case of international and refugee students at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, United States.

- Cornell is an institute of higher education in one of the largest destination countries in the world. Like many R1 universities, it admits a large number of international students.
- Recent policies and world events have led to the admittance of refugee students from Afghanistan and Ukraine.
- Substantively important case. Ivy League status, global presence, federal funding means that Cornell's policies could be mirrored by peer institutions.
    - Cornell was also one of the universities that spearheaded the refugee student recruitment program

Field Methods Used in the Project

We employ various qualitative approaches:

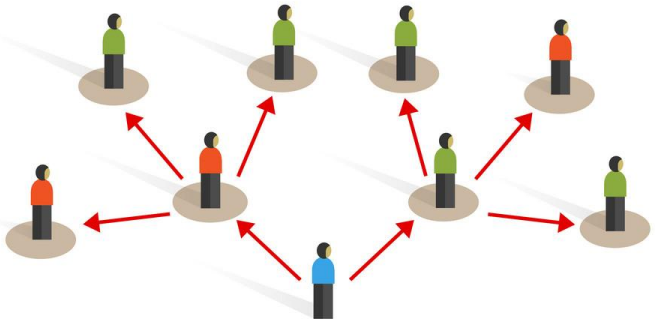
- Participant observations
- In-depth interviews
- Qualitative focus groups



Sampling Strategy

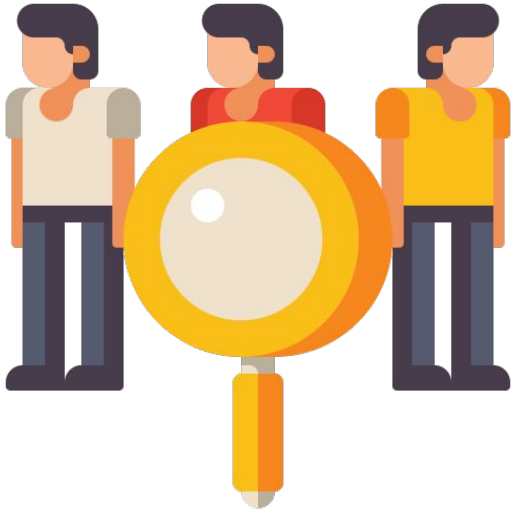
Snowball and convenience sample of international and refugee students.

- **In-depth interviews:**
  - 3 graduate international students
  - 2 undergraduate refugee students
  - 3 staff interviews
- **Qualitative focus groups:**
  - A focus group of 6 undergraduate refugee students
- **Participant observation** around campus and adjacent areas.



Participant observation (Simon 2019)

- **Participant observation:** researchers are both observing and participating in the practices about which they are inquiring
- **Two types of PO implemented in this study**
  - Observing behavior
  - Interacting with participants
- **Study populations**
  - International students
  - Refugee students
  - University faculty and staff
  - Other Cornell students
- **Sites we went**
  - English Language Support Office (ELSO)
  - Holland International Living Center
  - Toni Morrison Hall
  - Gimme Coffee (at Gates Hall), The Market
  - Refugee cultural events



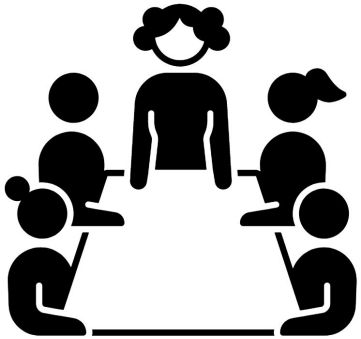
In-depth interviews (Leech 2002)

- **Semi-structured interview:** the middle ground between unstructured informal interview and structured interviews – one that can provide detail depth, and insider's perspective, while at the same time allowing hypothesis testing
    - Open-ended, prepared questions as loose guide
- **Why use interviews?**
    - Theory testing
    - Identify mechanisms
- **Study populations**
    - International graduate students
    - Refugee undergraduate students
    - University administration staff



Focus group (Morgan 1996)

- Focus group: a research technique that collects data through **group interactions** on a topic determined by the researcher.
  - Unlike conventional interview where the alternation happens between the researcher and the participant, focus groups rely on the interactions within the group
- Whether focus group is an appropriate method depends on
  - How actively and easily the participants would discuss the topic of interest
  - The barrier for active and easy interaction shouldn't be too high
- Study population
  - Refugee undergraduate students



Ethical Considerations



- ***Informed consent***: Obtained oral consent following our IRB protocol from all participants, making sure they understand the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty.
- ***Confidentiality:*** Protect the privacy of all participants. Make ensure any data collection does not include identifiable information. Unless given explicit permission from the participants, direct quote can't be used.
- ***Cultural sensitivity***: Recognize and respect cultural differences and sensitivities when interacting with international and refugee students. Make sure questions asked in interview and/or focus group discussion are respectful and do not re-traumatize participants, especially refugee students
- ***Researcher competence:*** Researchers should possess the necessary expertise and cultural competence to work with international and refugee students. Researchers should at least complete the ethical considerations lecture of GOVT 6019 Field Methods as well as the IRB training before going to the field.
- ***Benefit to the community***: Consider the potential benefits of the study to participants and the broader Cornell community. Focus on how our findings can help inform the university's support policies toward international and refugee students.

IRB Application and Exemption

- We submitted our IRB application (IRB0147452) on March 31. Per communication with Cornell IRB officer, Joyel Moeller, this class is granted with a formal ““Not Human Subject Research Determination” designation.

Protocol Summary

- Protocol Number: IRB0147452
- Protocol Title: Examination of Refugee and International Student Experiences at Cornell: Under what conditions do refugees successfully integrate into US higher education institutions?
- Protocol PI: Zinab Attai (zza2)
- Faculty Advisor: Sabrina Karim (smk349)
- Protocol Stage: Initial Protocol Application
- Preliminary Review Type: Exempt



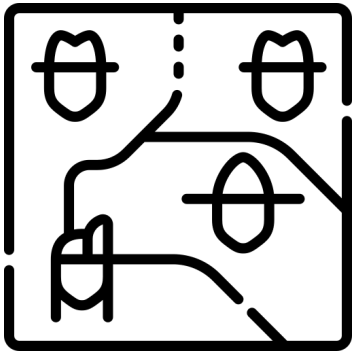
Safety Considerations



- **Data safety**: Safeguard the privacy of all participants' data. Restrict the data to the research team and the faculty advisor. When reporting our final report, any identifiable information should be anonymized.

- **Emotional safety:** This study may involve sensitive topics and personal narratives. Ensure that the study procedures and field methods used do not cause unnecessary distress or harm to participants.

Implementation: Participant observation



- This took place in structured and unstructured settings:
  - The English Language Support Office –ELSO (graduate international students)
    - Discussions were held on the combatting the inner critic; how to know one's work is 'good enough'; strategies for entering the academic job search; and self-designated accomplishments; challenges for international students
  - Refugee Cultural Events
  - International Student Union Events
  - Informal Gatherings (international students)
  - Public social spaces at Cornell (Gimme Coffee, The Market Terrace)

Implementation: In-Depth Interviews

- Student Interviews
  - Undergraduate Students
    - Refugee students
  - Graduate Students
    - International students
- Staff Interviews
  - ELSO (graduate student serving)
  - The Knight Institute (undergraduate serving)



Implementation: Focus Group

- **Group Selection (ideal for sensitive topics):** Homogenous group of refugee students (all from Afghanistan)
- **Location:** Jameson Hall Lounge followed by tea/desserts at Zinab's house
- **Format:** Mixed language focus group (Dari and English); observing not question responses as well as group interaction
- **Agenda**
  - Set groups rules and consent
  - Easy questions
  - Harder questions
  - Closing remarks
  - Remind people of ground rules



Sample Focus Group Question and Response

Sample Q: Have you felt supported by the Cornell community? If so, can you describe what that has looked like? If not, what do you think could be improved?

a. *Probes*: Can you provide an example of what made you feel welcomed/unwelcomed?

Sample A: Yeah, for sure. I've felt a decent amount of support from the Cornell community, especially from the international student services and Shaun from the undergraduate admissions office. They've provided resources and guidance to help me navigate the complexities of studying abroad.

Additionally, I've **found some great friends within my program** who have been there for me during tough times. They've made me feel like I belong, and that's been super important. I agree however, while the university tries to help, **there are many requirements and time commitments for simply being a refugee that I don't think are as helpful as they might think**. I also think asking refugee students to **take on debt to pay the university for taxes** is slightly unfair and difficult for us to swing.

Results: Students (Refugees)



- **Different background, even among the homogenous group**
  - Placed vs. applied
  - Family background
- **Academic expectations are different from home country.**
  - Workload is different, active class participation/attendance is different (US phenomenon).
- **Finances:** Refugees are particularly vulnerable to financial hardship, with higher pressure to work additional jobs alongside their education
  - Already in debt to the university
- **Mental Health:** As refugees who have escaped violence, their families are still in the countries they have fled
  - Engage with the traumatic context of their home country.
  - Stigma surrounding therapy, have found it to not be useful for them
  - Prefer space and support for learning community based mental health support

Results: Students (Both Refugee and Int'l)



- **More hurdles than American or English-speaking students**
  - Pronunciation tutors
  - Writing support
  - Immigration concerns
- **Mixed experiences at Cornell**
  - Both pleasant and difficult
  - Difficulties: homesickness, navigating a new country and culture
  - Positives: Friends, Academic Opportunities, Extracurricular activities
- **Subconscious bias**, people not willing to engage if you're not also an international/refugee student.
- **Easier to connect with common background** or other international students than average American student.

“I often want to give up and go back to my family in Afghanistan, but my friends encourage me to stay and persevere. Their support is so important to my success here.”

Results: Challenges for Success

Common Results	International Students	Refugee Students
Question the efficacy of support given by the university	Would like more Professors to be sensitized to realities of international students	Would like more meaningful support and less technical hurdles and administrative “checkmarks”
Visa/immigration status	Concerned about job prospects	Need to prepare cases for asylum
Communication/Social barriers	Unless grouped with others; gravitate to familiar linguistic backgrounds	Tend to relate more with international students than domestic
Financial concerns	Stipends only cover bare minimum; Language requirements stop PhD students from accessing the money they need through teaching.	End up in debt to Cornell while possibly also supporting families at home and working minimum wage jobs (undergraduates)

Results: Administrative Implications



- The decentralized collegiate system poses a challenge for both funding and pooling of services.
    - Colleges need to reach out specifically to have these offices design support programs for students
    - The Office of the Vice Provost for International Affairs is in charge of hosting Refugee students and ensuring their support.
        - The available support is not disclosed to staff asked to serve them outside the regular scope of work
- The amount of resources allocated to undergraduates may be disproportionate to those used by undergraduates given the other compulsory courses and commitments they have to meet.
    - Graduate students have more time and incentive to use services like ELSO and the graduate writing Center; but these offices can cater to less.
- Language and Writing Support Offices offer students low-stakes environment for students to process culture-shock and learning curves; but this is not explicitly mandated or funded to the degree that it could be.

Recommendations: Students



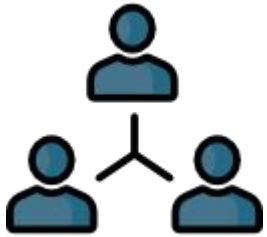
- Invest in cultural events (they cultivate a safe space)
- Provide support for community based life-lines, better than therapy that is targeted to school issues (not trained to help war refugees).
    - But building community is another time-consuming task in and of itself.
- Instead of creating a check-list of requirements for refugee and international students, mitigate the workload by reducing unnecessary administrative tasks
- Assign peer mentors to check-in consistently with the students throughout the semester to ensure their emotional well-being and support
- Workshops on how to handle imposter syndrome

Recommendations: Administrative



- Funding effective graduate programs with high student demand (ELSO; the Graduate Writing Center) - *(Staff)*
- Training Professors in trauma-informed pedagogical styles - *(Staff)*
- Training Professors in on the immigration and work related challenges faced - *(Graduate Students)*
- Alternatives to compulsory therapy - *(Undergraduate Refugees)*
- Alternatives to compulsory programming - *(Undergraduate Refugees)*
- Access to lawyers (not only law students) in the Refugee Rights Clinic *(Refugees)*
- Accepting Refugees if Cornell is prepared to ensure they are fully supported beyond the bare necessities *(Staff)*
- Official Policy allowing for self-disclosure of refugee students.
- The Office of Global Learning should have more staff who are not lawyers - *(Graduate Students)*

Recommendations: Social



- Organize workshops/seminar on subconscious bias to raise the awareness of subconscious social biases
    - Encourage student societies to collaborate on events that showcase different cultures, perspectives and experiences
- Offer more language support services t to international and refugee students from both ELSO office and Knight Institute to help them feel more comfortable and confident communicating in English
- Establish peer support group to connect international and refugee students, providing a platform for them to connect, share experiences, and support one another (International buddy program)

Limitations

- Low *n-size*; difficult to access a range of international and refugee students at different levels, specifically post-graduate refugee students
- Convenience Sampling
- Focus group was among a homogenous group of refugee students
  - Already an existing social circle of undergraduate students
  - Consensus may have been built too easily
- Focus group administration by a peer/friend
- OGL and OVPIA were not available to comment on this work

thank you, next

