

# African International Student Representation in the Literature: A Scoping Review

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**Abstract:** International student enrollment has steadily increased since the 1960s, and international students can be found in colleges and universities across the United States. African international students are a subset of this population, and this scoping review examines the extant literature to explore what is known about the experiences of African students in U.S. universities and the implications of those findings. We identified three themes including racism and racial identity, social capital/network, and resiliency factors of this population.

**Keywords:** African international student, scoping review, mental health, resiliency factors.

## Introduction

During the 2020/21 academic year, 914,095 international students were enrolled in U. S. universities, and African international students made up 10% of overall international students in the United States (Institute of International Education, 2021). The economic impact of international students in the United States is well documented (Hegarty, 2014) and indicates that American universities rely on this population for continuous growth. International students have been a part of United States higher education since the 1940s (Institute of International Education, 2021) and contributed over \$28 billion and 300,000 jobs to the U.S. economy in 2021 alone (NAFSA, 2021). Hegarty (2014) explored the growing influence of international students and their importance in higher education enrollment. Existing research has explored the different stressors that international students experience but the literature on the well-being of African international students in the United States is emergent and sparse (Alharbi & Smith, 2018).

African youth and young adults moving to the United States to enroll in higher education programs are vulnerable to a wide range of stressors accompanying the transition (Hansen et al., 2018; Campbell, 2015). Protective factors, such as the presence of family in the United States vary for international students. While international students may already have family members, friends, or old acquaintances in the United States, others arrive with a social network intact. Research shows that international student stressors lead to adverse effects like depression, anxiety (general and academic), and mental health challenges (Kim et al., 2019) that affect development and reduce the quality of life for the individuals as well as their family.

The research on the wellbeing and mental health of African immigrants in the United States is both emergent and well documented (Alharbi & Smith, 2018; Abimbola, 2021; Ahmed & Rasmussen, 2020; Escamilla & Saasa, 2020). The isolation that accompanies the move is one that may not always be captured in the research. For international students, these stressors may be heightened by additional factors such as culture shock and acculturation stress as they struggle to adjust to new cultural norms and preserve their connection to their home culture and families. Research suggests that acculturation stress is prevalent among the general international student body. The diverse ways by which they cope depend on different variables such as home culture, age, individual experiences, and the motivation to complete their education in the United States (Hansen et al., 2018; Campbell, 2015). Quality of life increases for African international students and their families when policies and educational practices help students to better cope with stressors. Minutillo et al. (2020) suggested that services provided to international students should be specific to individuals. Providers of these services should be aware of the differences in culture and perceptions of international students from different regions, countries, cultures, and languages. Research influences policies and educational decisions which, in turn affect students, both domestic and international (Campbell, 2015). Scholarship on international student experiences in the U.S. should be representative of the diverse population that make up the international

student body. Due to the gap in the literature on stressors and protective factors unique to African international students, we conducted a small-scale scoping review to map the findings of recent literature on African international students in U.S. institutions. Specifically, we ask the following question: what is known about the well-being and experiences of African international students in U.S. universities?

## Method

We used scoping review methodology (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005) to explore patterns and themes in the extant literature on the well-being and psychosocial adjustment of African international students attending U.S. universities. One of the advantages of scoping reviews in comparison to other synthesis methods (e.g., systematic literature reviews, meta-analyses) is that this method is well-suited for exploring the breadth of what is known about a topic that is under examined. That is, scoping methodology is useful for “mapping” multiple dimensions of existing research, such as similarities and differences in methods, theoretical frameworks, findings, and empirical gaps (Jensen & Sanner, 2021; Peters et al., 2015). In the present paper, we followed Arksey and O'Mally's (2005) five-step process for conducting scoping reviews, including (1) identifying the inquiry question, (2) identifying relevant studies, (3) study selection, (4) charting the data, and (5) reporting results.

### Articles Selection

The databases searched during this scoping review include (APA PsychINFO, APA PsychArticles, and SocINDEX, Education Source). The initial search was conducted in March 2022 followed by another search in April 2022. The inclusion criteria used to identify relevant articles included empirical articles published in peer-reviewed journals between 2012-2022 whose sample consisted of African international students attending U.S. institutions. The following keywords were used to narrow the search: “African international students” AND “foreign-born students in the U.S.” AND “international students of color.” This yielded a total of 88 articles. After reviewing the titles, abstracts, and main text, 80 articles were excluded due to not meeting criteria. Inclusion criteria was expanded to include a mixed sample population that included African international students and international students from other countries due to the limited amount of research found on this population.

A total of 10 articles were included for the scoping analysis and are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1:**

Authors	Year	Title	Methods
Ashong, C., & Commander, N.	2017	Brazilian and Nigerian international students' conceptions of learning in higher education.	Qualitative research – use of interviews and reflective diaries.

Briscoe, K. L., Yao, C. W., Oates, E. Q., Rutt, J. N., & Buell, K. J.	2011	Perceptions of social networks among first-year international students of color.	Qualitative research – use of interview (longitudinal study of one year)
Fries-Britt, S., George Mwangi, C. A., & Peralta, A. M.	2014	Learning race in a U.S. context: An emergent framework on the perceptions of race among foreign-born students of color.	Qualitative research – focus groups
George Mwangi, C. A., Changamire, N., & Mosselson, J.	2019	An intersectional understanding of African international graduate students' experiences in U.S. higher education.	Qualitative research - counterstories
Manyibe, B. M., Manyibe, E. O., & Otiso, K. M.	2013	College student leadership development: An examination of pre-college leadership development of African students in the United States.	Qualitative research – phenomenological design
Koo, K. K., Yao, C. W., & Jung, G. H.	2021	"It is not my fault": Exploring experiences and perceptions of racism among international students of color during COVID-19.	Qualitative method – focus groups
Mangwo, A., Whitney, S., & Chareka, O.	2013	The role of volunteerism on social integration and adaptation of African students at a Mid-Western university in the United States.	Qualitative research - interviews
Omosho, S.	2018	Live experiences of African nursing students: Insights for enhancing international students' success.	Qualitative research - phenomenology
Shadowen, N. L., Williamson, A. A., Guerra, N. G., Ammigan, R., & Drexler, M. L.	2019	Prevalence and correlates of depressive symptoms among international students: Implications for university support offices.	Quantitative research – hierarchical multiple regression model
Sparks, D. M., Nandakumar, V., & Njock Libii, J.	2019	"We are shaped by our experiences" intersectionality	Qualitative research –

and the African international  
STEM student.

interview and  
case study

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### **Articles Synthesis**

To analyze and synthesize the findings across the 10 selected articles, a literature review table was created to extract key design elements, sample size, sample characteristics, research question(s) or purpose, methods, results, and implications. The literature review table allowed for a compilation of chosen articles, making for easy access to information. Next, a synthesis table was used to facilitate the grouping and comparison of major findings. The lead author used a color-coding strategy to map similarities within and across content. The synthesis table allowed for easy access to study results and made comparisons across study results accessible, leading to the identification of major patterns. Analysis of major patterns were focused on answering research questions about African international students, paying attention to emerging trends and gaps in the literature. The second author reviewed the emerging themes identified by the first author, and inconsistencies were discussed by both authors leading to clarification about the relationship between themes and the extracted literature content.

### **Results**

This small-scale scoping review was undertaken to answer the following research question: what is known about the well-being and experiences of African international students in U.S. universities? While the 10 studies all reported on African international students in the U.S., they differed in their methods and findings. This scoping review found three major themes pertaining to the research that include racism/racial identity, social capital/network, and resiliency factors of African international students. First, we report on the participant characteristics of the samples used in the studies. Next, we present findings that correspond to the research question regarding the prevailing themes in the research on this population. Finally, we answer the research question by describing the three major themes identified in the synthesis.

### **Participant Characteristics**

Participants across the 10 articles included adult men and women between the ages of 18 and 45 years, born across countries in East, Southern, and West Africa, living away from family, and enrolled in both undergraduate and graduate programs in the U.S. Participants' time living in the U.S. ranged from 1 to 12 years. Participants were Africans from different countries in the continent with varying perspectives, cultural values, and experiences.

### **Findings for Research Questions**

The scoping review revealed that there is limited scholarship of African international students' experiences in peer-reviewed research. Five of the 10 articles reviewed specifically explored African students, while the other five articles used combined samples of international students from various continents (Asia and South America). We found that African international students are underrepresented in the literature on international students, leading to an under examination of their experiences. However, the overarching

subject-matter included the experiences of African students known as acculturative stress, and our scoping review found three themes including racism and racial identity, social capital/network, and resiliency factors.

### **Theme 1: Racism and racial identity**

Fries-Britt et al. (2014) found in their study that African international students have little to no conceptual understanding of racism and racial discrimination in the U.S. due to their own national background and socialization, racial issues are initially perceived as foreign, and unlike their African American counterparts. Yet, Koo et al. (2021) and Fries-Britt et al. (2014) found that participants' experiences of subtle or overt racism eventually led to an analysis and conceptualization of racism that relates to their own identities. Spark et al. (2019) concluded that the home cultures of participants influence and possibly guide their attitudes as they matriculate through their programs. International students from Africa have a different concept about race; Sparks et al. (2019) also found that their understanding of race was based in concepts such as tribalism and reflected substantive differences compared to their U.S. born African American peers. Omotosho's (2022) survey of nursing students regarding their experiences in the U.S. that students focused on their education and opportunities resented the way that American media presented race and race relations.

Sparks et al. (2019) noted that while African American students may consider race a part of their identity due to their environment, African students have to learn about race and go through a process of analyzing and understanding their position in a highly racialized society like the U.S. Shodowen et al. (2019) analysis of data concluded that a 45% of African students reached or exceeded the threshold for the symptoms of clinical depression and 24% for anxiety as a direct result of their experiences far away from home and support. Research shows that African American students have been historically exposed to racism and racial discrimination (Pettigrew, 1988; as cited by Sparks et al., 2019) and African students go through the process of experiencing, analyzing, and lastly reaching a climax where they form their own racial identity just like their African American counterparts. The process of reaching that racial identity for African students is different from native-born students (Ashong and Commander, 2017) and may lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation (Koo et al., 2021) and trigger mental health issues like depression and anxiety (Shodowen et al., 2019).

### **Theme 2: Social capital/network**

Research on international students documents their experiences, both positive and negative, while recommending interventions to help (Minutillo et al., 2020; Hansen et al., 2018; Campbell, 2015). African student-built relationships and networks helped them feel a sense of belonging and facilitated opportunities perceived as supporting their future professions and lives. Mangwo et al.'s (2013) found that for African students - volunteering, learning new skills, and building upon existing skills helped encourage relationships with host communities, which could possibly mitigate negative experiences of acculturative stress. In the same vein, Mangwo et al. (2013) also recognized the disadvantages that volunteering caused to participants increasing negative experiences. While the importance of building social capital or network cannot be over emphasized, Briscoe et al. (2022) highlighted the difficulties that came with building those relationships with domestic-born students. Briscoe

et al. concluded that the negative perceptions that African students have of their American classmates prior to arriving in the country may be a hindrance to building long-term relationships as well as experiencing racism (Koo et al., 2021; Fries-Britt et al., 2014).

Briscoe et al. (2022) also found that due to the difficulty in making friends with native-born students, African international students built homophilic relationships with students from their own countries and with international students from other countries before attempting to make friends with their American counterparts. George Mwangi et al. (2019) postulated in their study that wrong and negative assumptions prior to moving to the U.S., lack of support facilities, and pressure to assimilate and quickly adhere to U.S. standards may contribute to negative experiences of transition, hence participants sought relationships with students that could relate to their experiences.

Manyibe et al. (2013) and Mangwo et al. (2013) found in both studies that participants honed their skills through building social networks and capital prior to their move for school and during the course of their education in the U.S. even though learning styles and concepts (Ashong & Commander, 2017) were different from what they were used to. Researchers found that African international students' experiences, even while it had negative impacts, kept them focused on their goal. Their focus on their objectives may become an anchor to see their goals through.

### **Theme 3: Resiliency factors**

Previous themes in the present study showed that African students have a myriad of experiences as they matriculated through their programs. Shodowen et al. (2019) demonstrated the presence of clinical depression and anxiety symptoms with this population; Omotosho (2018) demonstrated the negative effects of isolation and detachment from participants' home countries; and George Mwangi et al. (2019) demonstrated how host universities use the diversity rhetoric to admit African international students without giving them the support they need to thrive in their environment. Even though there are opportunities to pursue dreams and goals (Omotosho, 2018), the lack of support (George Mwangi et al., 2019) and resources to adjust, the levels of anxiety symptoms (Shodowen et al., 2019) did not discourage the participants to pursue their goals (degree) and focus on their academics. Sparks et al. (2019) concluded that the influence from home cultures and the leadership skills learned within the families and communities (Manyibe et al., 2013) allowed participants to build relationships and find their own support systems, mitigating acculturative stress, as they transitioned into their host communities.

In a racialized society like the United States, students from Africa expect to be racially discriminated against (Koo et al., 2021) even when they do not understand the history and concept of racism (Sparks et al., 2019). But they focus on their studies, academic achievements, support systems, and build social capital in their host communities. Shodowen et al. (2019) showed in their study, that even with only 2% African students' representation in the sample size, social support positively influenced depressive symptoms. This means that African students build social support, homophilic relationships, and friendships that encourage completion of objectives irrespective of problems. This is not to say that there are no psychological effects as Shodowen et al. (2019) reported the prevalence

of depressive and anxiety symptoms. Even though negative perceptions of domestic students were reported to be present in participants, they attempted to build friendships and relationships with domestic students within their first year (Briscoe et al., 2022).

### **Implication and limitations**

The present scoping review sought to examine and understand how African international students are represented in the research, both the extent and patterns in the findings. The review searched for and identified peer reviewed articles using specific criteria for eligibility and further synthesized the studies to understand how African international student issues are documented. The present review found that African international students are represented in the literature if only on a minuscule scale. The review also found emerging themes that postulate how African students are represented in the literature, which included how racism and racial discrimination affect the identity of these students. The importance of building and sustaining social support and systems, and the resiliency factors of this population that revolved around social support systems. This review has limitations, which includes the size of the reviewed articles. For a nuanced understanding of how African international students are represented in research, a larger number of articles should be reviewed as they will cover more aspects and have larger sample sizes. This will be a benefit when making laws, policies, and educational decisions that will affect this population and could possibly affect domestic students as well.

This scoping review has several implications for research, practice, and policies. For research, there is a need to further explore this population in order to understand the specific issues of acculturative stress as well as culturally sensitive ways to mitigate those issues. Future research should consider this population's resiliency factors and how they can help mitigate issues like racism, isolation, loneliness, and mental health. These findings will help in educational decisions and policies affecting this population.

### **Conclusion**

Our scoping review revealed that empirical research on African international students in the United States scant. Scholarship produced within the last ten years offers insight on multiple dimensions of African international students' experiences including the influence of experiences prior to moving to the United States, transition periods, and post-graduation plans. International students from Africa are a growing population in colleges and universities across the nation. Therefore, it is important that their experiences are documented, and that culturally sensitive interventions are implanted on their behalf. Colleges and universities should also pay attention to this section of their student population; not just admissions acceptance rates, but in provision of services that will benefit them academically, professionally, and personally

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