

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE ADJUSTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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Abstract

Leaving home to attend university is a significant milestone for students, but this transition can be particularly challenging for international students. This paper examined the factors affecting academic, cultural, social, and psychological adjustments in students studying abroad. Common challenges included psychological distress, such as homesickness, depression, and anxiety. This paper seeks to deepen readers' understanding of the difficulties international students encounter as they adjust to a new academic setting. Specifically, the article addresses the factors that influence various adjustments and adaptation. The insights provided aim to assist students, educational institutions, and policymakers in offering the necessary resources for a smooth transition to help international students overcome these challenges.

Keywords: academic adjustment, psychological adjustment, cultural intelligence, cultural adjustment, social adjustment, International students.

INTRODUCTION

The decision to leave home for university represents a significant life change. However, the transition to university can be particularly difficult for international students. As they begin their studies in a foreign country, they are likely face various adjustment challenges. These difficulties encompass academic, social, cultural, and psychological adjustments. While some students quickly adapt to their new environment and cope with the stressors of living abroad, others experience psychological difficulties. Numerous studies document the influence of both personal and interpersonal factors on the adjustment process for international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Wang, Wei, Zhao, Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003; Chuang, & Li, 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). There are several issues faced by international students during their transition to a new academic setting. These factors contributing to adjustment and the different phases of cultural adaptation. The paper concludes by offering recommendations for students, educators, and policymakers on culturally sensitive practices that facilitate a smooth transition and successful adjustment for international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, the enrollment of international students in foreign countries has increased significantly. For example in 2023-2024 academic year, the U.S. universities hosted 886,052 international students, reflecting an 8.1% increase. From 2014 to 2024, the international student population surged by 72%, from 514,723 to 886,052 students. As the number of international students continues to rise, understanding the factors that affect their adjustment becomes increasingly essential.

The concept of adjustment, which stems from the Latin ad-justare, refers to balancing individual needs with environmental obstacles. Yi et al. (2003) identified five areas where international students are most likely to encounter adjustment challenges: academic, physical health, financial, vocational, and personal/social. Similarly, Gebhard (2012) explored the adjustment difficulties of international students, finding that they primarily struggle in three areas: academics, social interaction, and emotional reactions to their new environment. Language barriers, lack of familiarity with available resources, and the absence of a social support network intensify the challenges encountered in these areas, often leading to loneliness, feelings of depression, and isolation (Wei et al., 2007; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Wang et al. (2015) introduced the concept of "crosscultural loss" to describe the struggles of international students who experience a loss of familiar elements such as personal relationships, home environment, and educational systems while attempting to adapt to a new culture. They found that the effects of crosscultural loss diminished as students experienced increased life satisfaction, positive emotions, self-efficacy, and greater social integration with mainstream society, all of which are associated with better cultural adjustment and acculturation.

ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT

International students often view studying abroad as a transformative experience that can create opportunities to impact their lives and others positively. Education plays a pivotal role in fostering change, and the desire to learn is a key motivator for international students. However, adjusting to a new academic environment can be challenging, and for many students, it represents their first real learning experience in a new culture. It is not surprising, therefore, that academic adjustment often presents significant challenges. Rienties et al. (2012) found a negative correlation between social adjustment and academic performance. For instance, Lowinger, He, Lin, & Chang (2014) studied Chinese students in the U.S. and found that discrimination and homesickness were linked to academic procrastination in male students, while female students' procrastination was influenced by academic self-efficacy, English language ability, culture shock, and stress. Kuo (2011) identified language challenges such as difficulties in listening comprehension and oral proficiency as significant issues for international students, particularly when trying to understand lectures in a foreign language.

Many students must also adapt to the educational system of their host country, which can be stressful and unfamiliar. While students may have preconceived ideas about their university, they may face anxiety regarding registration processes, which often differ from their home country's systems. They may struggle with unfamiliar curricula, credit systems, and even choosing a major. Students who are eager to complete their degrees quickly may register for many credit hours, adding additional stress. This anxiety is often compounded by the reality that many students, despite arriving with a clear academic plan, may wish to change their major once exposed to different areas of study and career opportunities.

Once enrolled, students have certain expectations regarding their academic experience, particularly how they interact with the university authorities and fellow students. The first day of class is crucial for setting the tone of the student's adjustment. It serves as a time for observation and reflection, where students may recognise cultural and language differences. A positive first day experience is essential for boosting a student's confidence and optimism about their academic transition.

Language barriers can be another source of stress for international students adjusting to an academic environment, particularly in courses requiring fluency. Students must simultaneously work on improving their language skills while keeping up with class materials. Their learning styles, whether auditory, visual, or pragmatic, also influence their ability to comprehend the material. Some students, especially those from educational systems that emphasise rote memorisation or hands-on learning, may initially struggle. Young (2011) found that international students could adapt to new learning environments despite initial challenges. Asian students, for example, were accustomed to formal lecture styles and rote memorisation and needed time to adjust to more interactive learning methods.

Another challenge is adjusting to different assessment methods. Some students may be more familiar with written exams, while others excel at essay writing. The anxiety generated by unfamiliar evaluation systems can be significant. Students are advised to seek guidance from their instructors and exercise patience as they adapt to new evaluation methods. In addition, financial difficulties can interfere with academic progress, so it is important for students to seek advice if needed to avoid further stress.

International students often set high expectations for themselves, which can lead to anxiety if those expectations are unrealistic. Interaction with domestic students can be helpful, as they may provide a perspective that balances the pressures of academia. While many international students place great importance on education, they must also navigate the realities of a new academic culture. Institutions can ease this transition by providing clear information about registration, curricula, and grading systems, as well as assigning culturally sensitive academic advisors. A student's first impression of a university can significantly influence their adjustment process. Participating in orientation programmes can also help students network and access academic resources, which can support their transition and academic success.

SOCIAL ADAPTATION

Zhang & Goodson (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 64 studies published between 1991 and 2010, focusing on psychosocial adjustment predictors for undergraduate and graduate international students. They identified several factors that significantly affect psychosocial adjustment, including stress, social support, English proficiency, country of origin, U.S. residence length, acculturation, social interaction with Americans, self-efficacy, gender, and personality. Social factors also play a significant role in adaptation, with research showing that international students' tendency to gossip positively contributed to their sociocultural adjustment (Ji-yeon & Pistole, 2014). A study of Taiwanese international students revealed that personality traits, knowledge of the U.S., attitudes toward making friends with Americans and other international students, English proficiency, and social context predicted the likelihood of forming friendships with Americans 14 months after their arrival (Ying, 2002). Additionally, perceived social support has been strongly linked to the psychological adjustment of international students (Mohd-Yusoff & Othman, 2011).

International students often report more incredible social and emotional support from fellow international students than native students (Chavajay, 2013). Moreover, a positive correlation between social networking and social adjustment has been found. For example, international students who interacted with native friends

via Facebook experienced better social adjustment. Internet use was also shown to significantly predict positive social and emotional adjustment (Gómez, Urzúa, & Glass, 2014). Engaging in leisure activities like sports and social events positively impacts social adjustment and acculturation. These activities and establishing a social network were significant predictors of successful social adjustment. Similarly, Baba & Hosoda (2014) found that social support helped mediate the relationship between stress factors and crosscultural adjustment. Duru & Poyrazli (2011) studied the factors influencing adjustment difficulties among Turkish international students. They found that higher levels of social connectedness, fewer experiences of discrimination, more years of study and better English proficiency were associated with fewer adjustment difficulties. Conversely, a lack of social connectedness and perceived discrimination were key predictors of adjustment challenges.

CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Trifonovitch (1977) outlined four stages of cultural adjustment for international students. The first stage, known as the "honeymoon stage," is marked by excitement and enthusiasm. Students feel optimistic about their new adventure, often experiencing a sense of accomplishment in studying abroad as their dreams of international education are realised. However, this stage can also involve minor conflicts and misunderstandings arising from cultural differences. The second stage is the "hostility stage," where students struggle with the new culture's frustrations and challenges. Feelings of confusion, anger, sadness, anxiety, and depression are common during this stage. Students may attribute their struggles to external factors and may develop cultural mistrust, becoming less cooperative, unmotivated, and disengaged from their academic pursuits. The third stage, the "humour stage," reflects students' ability to engage in more social and relaxing activities. They start to reflect on the challenges they faced during the hostility stage and become more comfortable interacting with others. Having made friends, they begin to enjoy their academic experiences. Finally, in the "home stage," students feel fully settled in their new environment, integrating aspects of their home culture with their new one. Feelings of acceptance and belonging characterise this stage. Cultural maladjustment is more likely in the early stages (honeymoon and hostility), while cultural adjustment typically occurs in the humour stage and is completed in the home stage. Smith & Khawaja (2011) refer to the transition from maladjustment to cultural adjustment as acculturation, a process where students adapt their worldview to align with or integrate into the mainstream culture. They note that acculturation is a dynamic and multifaceted process, with some students successfully adjusting and achieving cultural competence while others experience ongoing acculturative stress.

Cultural and emotional intelligence are key concepts that further explain the cultural adjustment process. Cultural intelligence is the ability to relate, adapt, and work effectively across different cultures. While a student may have a high IQ, this does not guarantee successful adjustment, as they may lack cultural intelligence. Morrell, Ravlin, Ramsey & Ward (2013) found that prior international experience was positively correlated with all dimensions of cultural intelligence. Both cultural intelligence and psychological hardiness have been identified as predictors of successful psychological adjustment for international students (Harrison & Brower, 2011). Psychological hardiness, often synonymous with resilience, is another important factor in adjusting to a new environment.

Emotional intelligence, which is closely related to cultural intelligence, refers to the ability to recognise, evaluate, and manage one's emotions, as well as to interact effectively with others. A student with emotional intelligence is better able to navigate both individual and group dynamics, adjusting their responses as needed. Additionally, emotionally intelligent students tend to understand human nature and individual differences more deeply. International students with high emotional intelligence are more likely to adapt successfully to their new cultural environment. Research indicates a strong connection between emotional intelligence and cultural adjustment. Jazaeri & Kumar (2008) found that emotional intelligence significantly predicted cultural adjustment, while Gullekson & Tucker (2012) found that emotional intelligence was a predictor of intercultural growth. Students with higher emotional intelligence levels reported more growth in intercultural experiences, particularly in short-term programmes. Interestingly, international students generally score lower on emotional intelligence than domestic students (Parker, Pettijohn, & Rozell, 2011), highlighting the importance of fostering emotional intelligence among international students. Rawlings & Sue (2013) recommend incorporating emotional intelligence into academic pedagogy to support international students' cultural adjustment.

PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT

The psychological adjustment of international students is influenced by various factors, including mental health, biological influences, and the stress of acclimating to a new environment. Research shows that depression, anxiety, and stress are common during the adjustment process (Adu & Mpuangnan, 2022; Hwang et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2015; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). These students may also experience loneliness, culture shock, and physical symptoms such as headaches, which can be manifestations of psychological distress in some cultures. A review by Church (1982) highlighted several issues that international students face during the adjustment process, such as language barriers, financial difficulties, adapting to a new educational system,

homesickness, and experiencing discrimination. Many students also report symptoms of depression, anxiety, and social challenges (Yokushko et al., 2008; Yi et al., 2003). Li, Wang & Xiao (2014) found that East Asian international students' psychological well-being was linked to their length of stay, English proficiency, attitude toward seeking help, and acculturation. Depression was the most frequently reported psychological issue, followed by challenges related to acculturation.

The power to manage stress is a crucial factor in psychological adjustment. Coping styles, such as emotional focused and problem focused coping, affect how students handle stress. Emotional focused coping helps manage emotional responses to stress, while problem focused coping addresses the root cause of the stress. Students with an internal locus of control, who believe they can influence their situation, maybe more confident in managing stress than those with an external locus of control. It is vital for students to recognise their coping mechanisms and to seek support when necessary.

Resilience is another key factor in psychological adjustment. Resilience refers to a person's ability to bounce back after adversity. Masten et al. (1990) described resilience as the capacity for successful adaptation despite challenging circumstances. Resilience can help mitigate psychological adjustment issues, and students with higher resilience tend to fare better in adapting to their new environment.

Early family and community experiences also influence how well international students adjust. Secure attachments to family or caregivers foster positive psychological adjustment. Students with strong support systems are more likely to form new social connections, helping alleviate feelings of isolation or homesickness. Maintaining relationships with family and friends back home can provide emotional stability during adjustment.

Cultural differences also influence coping strategies. Chai et al. (2012) found that Asian international students rely more on religious coping strategies than their African counterparts. These strategies were linked to better psychological well-being and improved social life. Similarly, students who engage in positive coping strategies, such as acceptance, reframing, and striving, are better able to adjust to cultural challenges (Wang & Heppner, 2012).

Additionally, certain personality traits, such as extroversion and openness to experience, have been shown to facilitate psychological adjustment (Lin et al., 2012; Eun-Ju et al., 2011). Gender differences also play a role in adjustment, with some studies indicating that female students may have an easier time adjusting than male students (Lee et al., 2009). A combination of resilience, effective coping strategies, and strong social support systems can help international students navigate the psychological challenges of studying abroad.

COUNSELLING UTILISATION FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students are often at higher risk of experiencing psychological distress due to various challenges they face while adjusting to life abroad. Counselling services can be instrumental in helping students navigate these challenges. However, international students are often hesitant to seek mental health assistance. Research has shown that many international students underutilise counselling services (Adu & Nimo, 2023; Bong Joo, Bennett, & Beauchemin, 2014). Onabule & Boes (2013) found that while some students may associate counselling with a negative stigma, they tend to view sessions with academic advisors more positively.

Additionally, many students may not fully understand the potential benefits of counselling services. Mesidor & Sly (2014) examined the relationship between psychological distress, social-cognitive factors (e.g., attitudes, norms, and perceived behavioural control), and help-seeking intentions. Their study found that perceived behavioural control students' sense of self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of their intentions to seek mental health support. Cultural mistrust, the stigma surrounding mental illness, and lack of resources, like as health insurance, often lead to reluctance in seeking help. Language barriers, cultural differences, and gender also play a role in students' reluctance to engage with mental health services.

To better support international students, universities must make a dedicated effort to promote awareness of the benefits of counselling services. It is crucial to employ counsellors who are culturally sensitive and experienced in addressing the unique challenges faced by international students. These professionals should be mindful of the diverse backgrounds and difficulties these students may encounter, ensuring that therapy is both culturally appropriate and effective. Acknowledging the student as the expert in their own culture and experiences can foster a more potent therapeutic relationship and better outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

International students often experience various cultural, social, psychological, and academic adjustment challenges. To ease their transition, universities should work closely with students to develop tailored adjustment plans that support their unique needs. Universities can assist by maintaining an up-to-date website that provides relevant information about life on campus, local culture, and practical details about living and studying in a new country. Additionally, sending informational resources to students before they arrive can reduce anxiety and help manage unrealistic expectations.

Creating a welcoming environment is essential for facilitating students' adjustment. Universities should consider involving current international students in welcoming activities for incoming students. This peer mentorship can help newcomers through their early days on campus, providing emotional and practical

support. Collaboration between universities and students on academic, social, cultural, and psychological adjustment matters can help make the transition smoother and more manageable.

Resilience is another key factor that can ease the adjustment process. Encouraging students to develop self-awareness, focus on their strengths, and learn from challenges can help them build resilience. Observing resilient people, engaging with positive individuals, and using positive affirmations can support this process. Mindfulness practices, including yoga, have also been shown to alleviate stress and help students stay grounded during their adjustment (Owen & Kalavala, 2012).

Understanding and adapting to the host culture is another important aspect of adjustment. While it is crucial for students to stay connected to their home culture, engaging with the local culture is essential for successful acculturation. Students can immerse themselves through media, community interactions, and local events to better understand their new environment.

Addressing financial concerns is also vital. Since international students may face challenges securing employment due to visa restrictions, universities can help by offering on-campus job opportunities. Employment can provide students with a sense of purpose, helping them navigate the financial and social stresses associated with their studies abroad.

To ensure students meet their academic goals, students and universities must collaborate on developing an academic plan. Each international student should have access to an academic advisor and mentor to guide them through the curriculum, challenges, and expectations. For those struggling with language barriers, Kuo (2011) recommends that students receive training in listening comprehension and familiarise themselves with regional accents before arriving. Additionally, they should focus on improving their oral communication skills, as this can be more beneficial than focusing solely on reading and writing.

Self-efficacy, or students' belief in their power to succeed, plays a crucial role in shaping their academic performance and interactions. Research by Telbis, Helgeson, & Kingbury (2014) found that students with high self-efficacy also reported greater confidence in their resources and ability to manage challenges. Educators should emphasise the importance of recognising students' strengths, as a favourable academic environment and high expectations can encourage students to reach their full potential. The Pygmalion Effect, in which positive expectations lead to improved performance, underscores the importance of educators setting high expectations for their international students (Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1968).

Given the numerous challenges faced by international students, future research should focus on promoting self-care and developing effective strategies for stress management. Many students experience significant stress as they navigate the complexities of studying and living abroad. Balancing academic and cultural adjustment is crucial for their wellbeing, and self-care practices such as adequate sleep, exercise, and time spent socialising can contribute to a healthier, more productive experience. Sleep is particularly important, as it helps consolidate memory and learning while improving mood.

Students are encouraged to adopt time management strategies to reduce stress and improve productivity. Effective time management allows students to balance academic deadlines and other activities while maintaining wellbeing. Procrastination is often a significant source of stress, so it is important to prioritise tasks and manage time effectively. Self-care and time management practices can empower students to manage stress more efficiently and help them stay focused on their goals.

Culturally sensitive programmes can help normalise the adjustment process. Universities could consider bringing in alums or senior international students to share their experiences with newcomers. Peer programmes that involve international students have also been shown to significantly improve social adjustment (Nasirudeen, Koh, Lau, Seng, & Ling, 2014). This approach can provide a sense of community and ease the feeling of isolation that many international students face. Overall, addressing the unique challenges of international students requires collaboration between students, universities, and support services. By focusing on resilience, cultural adaptation, self-efficacy, and stress management, institutions can help international students academically and psychologically thrive.

CONCLUSION

Adjustment is a complex, multidimensional process influenced by various factors. This study explores the academic, social, cultural, and psychological challenges faced by international students and highlights the key components that shape their adjustment. Factors such as early life experiences, personality, self-efficacy, social support, spirituality, resilience, coping styles, and emotional and cultural intelligence play significant roles in this process. Each student's experience is unique, and no single factor determines whether their adjustment will be healthy or maladaptive. Students who face psychological distress are not inherently less intelligent than those who adapt successfully; instead, the interaction of multiple factors contributes to their overall adjustment.

While adjustment difficulties are common among international students, research consistently shows that they underutilise mental health services. Cultural mistrust, the stigma surrounding mental illness, and a lack of resources like financial strain and health insurance often discourage them from seeking help. Despite experiencing acculturative stress, academic challenges, psychological distress, and protective factors like

coping styles, resilience, social support, and spirituality can help mitigate the stress of living and studying in a new cultural environment.

To support international students, universities should consider integrating wellness programmes and creating support systems that ease the transition. Encouraging students to take advantage of mentorship, counselling, and tutoring services can significantly aid their adjustment. It is also important for the universities and staff to recognise their own cultural biases and limitations, as awareness of these can improve their interactions with international students and enhance their ability to offer culturally sensitive support.

Flexibility in coping is essential for successful adjustment and adaptation. Students who remain open to learning from their experiences, adjusting to new norms, and embracing change are likelier to thrive. Adjustment is a lifelong learning process, and academic institutions and students play a vital role in this process. Academic institutions that understand the factors influencing international students' adjustment, such as recognising maladaptive behaviours, promoting healthy coping strategies, and offering appropriate services, are better equipped to foster academic, social, cultural, and psychological wellbeing.

While providing a comprehensive education to international students presents challenges, it is ultimately rewarding. By equipping these students with the knowledge and support they need, universities are helping them succeed academically and preparing future global leaders who will make meaningful contributions to society. Education is a powerful tool for enhancing the human experience, and through thoughtful, culturally sensitive approaches, academic institutions can positively impact the lives of international students.

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