A Study on International Student Adjustment from Academic, Social and Cultural Viewpoints in Taiwan

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Abstract

College student adjustment is an important factor in the success of learning of students. Social, personal-emotional, academic and institutional adjustment challenges the average college student. However, international students have a bigger challenge when they also have to face culture adjustment. This analysis is a case study of international students at one of the domestic college in Southern Taiwan. The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ) and the reactions of a focus group helps explaining international students’ adjustment at the subject University. The sample used was some of international students. This analysis showed that international students vary on their adjustment across cultures. This analysis is limited because of the small sample and warrants further study on international student adjustment.

Keywords: Academic Adjustment, Social Adjustment, Personal-Emotional Adjustment, Institutional Adjustment, SACQ
1. Introduction

College students face many challenges while adjusting to college life in Taiwan. They must learn to operate in new environments, to live on their own, to work with new and unfamiliar people and to handle new stresses and new challenges. These challenges and adjustments are amplified when these students are more than just college students; when these college students are also foreigners they have more pressure to overcome and they have to assimilate to mainstream culture.

For American students studying at an American college, adjustment issues have been studied and seem to be categorized into four main categories. Schwitzer, Ancis and Brown (2001, p. 93) label these categories as institutional, academic, personal emotional and social adjustment. These main four categories may be suitable for the average traditional American college student; however, there seems to be an adjustment category lacking for international student adjustment. This category is cultural adjustment. International students must handle cultural adjustment while balancing college life. This analysis of international student adjustment is meant to investigate academic adjustment, social, and cultural adjustment that this particular population faces while in Taiwan colleges.

2. Literature Review

Adapting Academically

Academic systems are similar across cultures, but not completely identical, which forces international students to change once they enter into a new academic system. Ridley (2004) points out that

the discourses of academic disciplines in higher education can be confusing and mysterious for those who are new to university study. The confusion can be particularly greater for students coming from cultural and language backgrounds that are different to those underpinning the dominant ideologies of higher education institutions.

Specifically, international students in America generally must adjust to start thinking independently. Many international students anticipate that thinking independently will be the most difficult part of adjusting to an American college or university. Thinking independently might be a new experience for some international students who are accustomed to relying on the professor as the ultimate authority on the course subject. (Robinson,1992). Thus it could be shocking for international students to adjust to
professors who admit to not always knowing the right answers. Thinking independently and not relying on the professor is one academic adjustment for international students.

International students will also have to adjust to a new academic system; they will have to adopt the American perspective of plagiarism and cheating. As Jin and Cortazzi note “every culture of learning offers and alternative perspective on how to do things academically,” (as cited in Ridley, 2005, p. 96). International students will have to adopt the American perspective of plagiarism and cheating. Plagiarism is a foreign concept to many international students whose cultures do not place a great emphasis on the ownership of knowledge (Robinson,1992). For example, one international student might feel that sharing answers to a fellow classmate is legitimate; however in the American academic system it would be considered cheating. Once international students adapt to this American principle they will have less difficulties in the American classroom.

International students must also adjust to a different teacher and student relationship. From country to country, the relationship students have with their teacher differs. For example, in many Asian countries, the teacher is the main authority of the classroom. Students address their teachers as Sir and Madam and have been conditioned to respecting the teacher as a superior. However in America the student and teacher relationship is very informal comparatively. Robinson (1992) contends that this informality stems from American’s value of equality; teachers are equal to students in the classroom. Professors asking the class to call them by their first name, students visiting professor’s homes, professors and students working on research together, etc. are all examples of how informal the student and teacher relationship is in America. Initially the informality might be uncomfortable for international students, but as they attend more classes they will be able to adjust. Ladd and Ruby (1999) found that international students ultimately enjoy this more personal relationship with the instructor.

**Adapting Socially**

Since international students leave their social circles behind once they reach America, they will ultimately have to adapt socially. This social adaptation can be a positive or negative experience for students. Pruitt (1978) found that international students who have frequent contact with fellow students from their home country are happier with their experience in America than those students who have little contact with peers from their home country. This preference to having student friends from their own country
could be possibly due to the lack of institutional support. “Many international students have reported that because university officials rarely reach out to them, they had to rely on each other for support and advice on everything from academic issues to American culture,” (as cited in Klomegah, 2006, p. 305). Choosing who to socialize with is one social adaptation international students have to make.

Students choosing to make new friends outside of their culture will usually have to change how they socially interact. Haydon (2003) notes that international students will have to adjust to friendship building and dating etiquette, American customs (food, religious beliefs, non-verbal communication and physical contact) and American concept of independence in order to successfully make new friends. The success of these adjustments will impact how successful students are able to build their social network thereby successful socially adapting.

Adapting Culturally

International students have millions of small adjustments to make when studying in a new country. These adjustments could include using a fork instead of their hand to eat with, driving on the right side of the road instead of the left or even washing clothes in a washing machine instead of by hand. One big cultural adjustment is adapting to using a different language constantly. Lewthwaite (1997) found that language ability determines the success of international students in the new culture. Logically, if students are unable to understand what instructors, fellow classmates, staff members, etc. are saying, than it will be difficult to succeed. Steve Stoynoff (1997) found in a research study that a significant relationship exists between language proficiency and academic achievement.

The impact of language even affects students who speak English in their home country; these students must adjust to a new accent and new idioms. Phrases such as “bend over backwards,” “the early bird catches the worm” and “make ends meet” has the potential to confuse students who are not familiar with American English. Ladd and Ruby (1999) advise that professors who teach international students should be careful of how they use idioms. Students will face difficulties in adjusting to a new language and new phrases. This adjustment in language is just one of the many cultural adjustments that international students will make as they study in a different country.

3. Methodology

Method One—Quantitative Measurement
Participants

The population used for the quantitative element of this project was twenty-two graduate students from one of domestic college in Taiwan. This college is located in Southern Taiwan. The college’s enrollment includes many international students. The institution provides high quality undergraduate programs across a broad range of disciplines as well as provides a strong commitment to graduate education.

Instrument

First, the participants participated in a quantitative measurement, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ), developed by Robert W. Baker, and Bohdan Siryk. Baker and Siryk designed the questionnaire to assess how well students adapt to the demands of the college experience. Participants attain an overall adjustment score, as well as a sub score measuring four categories of adjustment. These categories include: academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment and institutional attachment (Baker & Siryk, 1984).

Academic adjustment measures a student’s success in coping with the various educational demands characteristic of the college experience. The normal range for the SACQ score in this category falls between 150 – 160 points. Social adjustment measures a student’s success in coping with the interpersonal and societal demands inherent in the college experience. These norms range from 80 – 160 points. Personal-emotional adjustment focuses on a student’s psychological and physical state during his or her adjustment to college, and the degree to which he or she is experiencing general psychological distress and problems. Typically students fall between an 85 – 95 point scale. Institutional attachment measures how a student feels about his or her college in general, the degree of commitment to educational goals, and attachment to the particular college. These scores are in the range of about 100 – 115 (Baker & Siryk, 1984). Participants answered 67 questions on a nine point scale, ranging from "applies very closely to me," to "doesn’t apply to me at all." Examples of items include, "I have been keeping up-to-date on my academic work," "my appetite has been good lately," "I am getting along very well with my roommate" and "I am very satisfied with my professors I have for my courses."

Measure Two—Qualitative Data

Participants

Students from a undergraduate level course from the subject college were asked to voluntarily participate in a focus group discussion to collect qualitative data for analysis.
Students’ responses to the focus group were grouped according to region. These regions included two students from Japan, three from the Southeast Asian Nations and three from America.

**Instrument**

The focus group discussion included cultural questions used to investigate the cultural adjustment these particular students faced when studying at the subject college. These focus questions particularly prompted students to discuss challenges adjusting to a new language, difficulties adjusting to local culture, differences in gender roles and any previous knowledge they might have acquired regarding local culture before entering into Taiwan. Included in the focus group were also academic questions. These included questions about their most challenging academic expectation, what motivated them to stay in school and what university services they used or would like. Questions regarding their social adjustment included their friends, experiences with Taiwanese and their plans for the future results.

For the analysis of method one, participants’ results were grouped obviously by type of adjustment and then by region. These regions included: Japan, Southeast Asian Nations and America. A total of 22 students participated. Of these, three were from Japan, 11 from Southeast Asian Nations, eight from America.

Within academic adjustment, six participants fell within the normal range with a standard deviation of 28.2. Of these six, half were Southeast Asian, two were Japan and one was America. The other students did not fall in the normal range. Within social adjustment, all but two participants fell within the normal range with a standard deviation of 15.8. Overall students indicated high achievement within social adjustment. Personal adjustment is where the surveys showed the greatest divide; over half of all the participants did not fall within the normal range with a standard deviation of 23.4. Only Southeast Asian and Japan students represented those who did achieve a normal score. The American students scored the lowest, and it is interesting to note that half of the Southeast Asian students scores were very low compared to the other half who indicated significant levels of personal adjustment. Under the category of institutional adjustment, most students fell below the normal range with a standard deviation of 14.7. Of the 22 participants, only three students scored over 100 points. These students represented Southeast Asia and Japan.

For the measure two, all students spoke more than one language and found it difficult to adjust to local teaching styles. The students also noted that the cultural knowledge that they acquired before coming to Taiwan was falsely portrayed through the pop culture of...
movies and television. All students felt they could benefit from financial aid and most students found Taiwanese to be generally friendly.

Some of the most widely used services on campus were the gym, writing center and library. When asked what services they wished university would enhance or begin to offer, responses varied but were primarily “comfort” services dealing with food, sense of community, housing, and religious holiday observance. Some of their suggestions included: satellite cable in the Computer Center where they could watch television in their native language, waiving attendance penalties in class for observing a religious holidays, and being provided with more options for housing. Other concerns dealt with first semester moving adjustments including setting up a bank account, finding someone with a car to take them to the grocery store, and providing used furniture for students who live off campus.

4. Conclusion

Academic Adjustment

The results of the SACQ reveal that generally Southeast Asian students are better academically adjusted than Japan students and American students. It may be assumed that the Southeast Asian students have better academic preparation in their country and they encounter less problems in learning. As previously mentioned, international students have to overcome three major academic adjustments: independent learning, new academic systems and new and different relationships with instructors. It was surprising that Southeast Asian students rated better in academic adjustment because Southeast Asian learning styles are quite different from Taiwanese learning styles. Perhaps Southeast Asian students at this college are more motivated to change their learning styles to adapt to the local education system. According to the focus group the Southeast Asian students motivation may stem from their personal academic goals or to please their parents. These two reasons may motivate Southeast Asian students more than their Japan and American counterparts. As previously mentioned, students enjoy the relationship with local instructors and so Southeast Asian students in particular may build better relationships with their instructors

Social Adjustment

In the SACQ, international students generally reached the normal range in social adjustment. This may represent that most international students at the subject college attain enough interpersonal relationships and thus are able to properly social adjust. When it comes to social adjustment challenges, according to the literature review,
international students tend to stay in their respective peer groups with the same cultural background. Perhaps the barrier this social adjustment for the subject college students is the cultural barrier. The international students may feel culturally misinformed because they may have based their knowledge on movies and pop culture. It is interesting to see that the Southeast Asian students show much better social adjustment than students from Japan and America. This could be attributed to the huge Southeast Asian students population took so much concern about Chinese cultures traditionally.

**Personal-Emotional Adjustment**

It was disheartening that none of the American students and met the normal range of personal-emotional adjustment. Half of the Southeast Asian students fell below the normal range and half of the Southeast Asian students fell above. All but one Japanese student feel above the personal normal range. This demonstrates that generally Southeast Asian and Japanese students are better adjusted than other students. However not all Southeast Asian students and Japanese students made it above the normal range. These scores demonstrate that Southeast Asian students and Japanese students do not always reach a normal personal-emotional adjustment. These differences suggest that the adjustment depends on the individual emotional situation. In addition, this adjustment may also depend on the extent to which students can attain enough mental support resources or emotional counseling services.

**Institutional Adjustment**

None of the American students met the normal range of institutional adjustment; one Japanese student met the normal range; five Southeast Asian students met the normal range. The Southeast Asian students again scored higher than their peers. According to the literature review, international students tend to stay in their peer groups with similar cultures which may be why students do not seek institutional support. For example, if students feel like resorting to their peers for help instead of visiting the counseling center then they will be less inclined to use the institutional support. The students did depend on the institution’s library and gyms. It is interesting that none of the students mentioned that they used campus eating facilities such as restaurants at the subject college or the cafeteria; this is likely that they have not made the cultural adjustment to local cuisine.

**5. Implication**

International students in the subject college generally encounter the adjustment problem in academic learning, social relationship, personal emotion and institution engagement.
Except some international students could show us the better adjustment condition, most international students cannot resolve the adjustment problem. The implication is that according to the research result international students could get help by several accesses: peer group support and individual emotional management. In addition, institutional instruction and support seems to be not enough in international student adjustment. When institutional instruction about the campus service is improved, international students could be expected to get better adjustment.

6. Limitations

The SACQ and focus group results are limited because they are from the limited sample of international students. Thus these results may not be applied to other international students in other field. In addition, the results of the survey may not represent their countries because of the limited size of the population. For a more accurate analysis, it is necessary to analyze results of SACQs from a larger and more diverse group.

References