

A Study of the Adjustment Process of International Students within the Taiwanese Institutions of Higher Education

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Abstract

In the past few years, a lot of international students came to study as a result of the Taiwanese government's desire to promote its higher education. According to the University World News, Taiwan plans indeed to increase the number of foreign students from 40,000 in 2012 to somewhere around 150,000 by 2020. Yet, for the international students who are currently enrolled in the Taiwanese universities, the process of adjusting to the Taiwanese cultural environment never runs smooth. With the intention to assist Taiwanese universities better comprehend the major difficulties faced by their international students and in order to provide them with adequate assistance, this study investigated the adjustment process of international students in the Taiwanese educational milieu. More specifically, the researcher sought to explore the challenges international students encountered or continue to encounter when making a transition to their life in Taiwan, how they react to those challenges and what mechanisms they employ to overcome them. Data were obtained not only from observations, but also and most importantly, from individual interviews with two staff and faculty members as well as eight international students enrolled at National Chung Hsing University for the 2012-2013 academic year. Research findings indicate that international students experienced significant challenges in terms of cultural adjustment, social adjustment, and academic adjustment, with the latter being divided into four sub-sections:

adjustment to language of instruction, adjustment to teaching methods, adjustment to new and different student-teacher relationships, and adjustment to the school's physical environment. The findings further indicate that the degree of these adjustment problems varies depending of the cultural background of the respondents and on the size of their respective communities within the school. Also, friends and families were reported as the primary sources of help for personal issues.

Key words: international students, cultural stress, adjustment, interview, Taiwan

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I. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Ever since the 9/11 attack in 2001, the number of international students choosing the United States as their study abroad destination has been on a noticeable decline. Meanwhile, other countries are investing extra efforts into attracting scientific, technological, and intellectual elites from around the world (Ren, Bryan, Min & Wei, 2007). Following the same vein, most of the Taiwanese universities (including National Chung Hsing University hereinafter referred to as NCHU) host international students who come to Taiwan to pursue a higher education in different disciplines. This comes as a result of the Taiwanese government's desire to promote its higher education by opening doors of opportunities to foreign students who would like to further their education abroad. A 2012 report from the University World News¹ states that Taiwan plans to increase the number of foreign students in its higher educational institutions from 40,000 in 2012 to 150,000 by 2020. For those students who come from various countries with different cultures, different experiences, and different educational systems, adjusting to the Taiwanese cultural and educational environment may prove to be challenging especially if the countries of origin of the students in question are very different from Taiwan on the cultural ground. The main motivations for this research are to be found in my personal experiences of studying as an international student in Taiwan over the last past five years.

1.2 Scope of Research

This research is exclusively limited to regular degree-seeking international students who are currently enrolled at NCHU. It includes Bachelor level, Master level and PhD level students. Exchange students from different countries were excluded from this research for two main reasons: Duration of stay in the host country and school workload.

Length of stay (or duration of sojourning) for studies in the host country has been perceived as a particularly fundamental factor in the process of adjustment. In fact, as time goes by, students become much more familiar with the host country's culture and,

¹ Retrieved at: <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20120814135723490>

therefore, the level of discomfort they were initially confronted with upon entering the host country gradually decreases (Adler, 1975; Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998; Ward & Rana-Dueba, 1999).

Also, exchange students usually do not take many classes. Compared to the regular students, they do not have too much workload, and they have much more leisure time. Those students do not usually encounter or experience the long-term difficulties and stress that their regular counterparts experience. Also, exchange students usually enjoy some privileges that regular students do not. For instance, institutional buddy programs and homestay programs in Taiwan are focused more on facilitating the social and academic lives of exchange students than regular students. Therefore, since exchange students are here for just a short period of time (usually one semester), and because they seem to enjoy living and study conditions that are different from their regular counterparts, it was deemed important not to include them in this study.

1.3 Research Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the adjustment process of international students in the Taiwanese educational milieu. This purpose is summarized in the following three sub-objectives:

- 1.To explore the challenges international students encountered or continue to encounter when making a transition to their social and academic lives in Taiwan.
- 2.To understand how the international students react to those challenges.
- 3.To analyze how and what mechanisms they employ to overcome those challenges.

II. Literature Review

2.1 Operational definition of terms

2.1.1 International Students

Depending on their own national education systems, different countries may give a different definition to the term “international students”. Those variations of the definition can be seen in the following cases as specified by Wikipedia:

In *Australia*: International students are defined as those studying onshore only

with visa subclasses 570 to 575, excluding students on Australian-funded scholarships or sponsorship or students undertaking study while in possession of other temporary visas. Since New Zealand citizens do not require a visa to study in Australia, they are therefore not referred to as international students.

In the *United States*: Any student who is enrolled at institutions of higher education in the US is referred to as “international student” provided he or she is neither citizen of the US, nor an immigrant, nor a refugee.

In *Japan*: ‘International students’ are defined as foreign nationals who study at any Japanese university, graduate school, junior college, college of technology, professional training college or university preparatory course on a ‘college student’ visa, as defined by the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act.

The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on its part defines the term ‘international students’ as “people who travel to a country different from their own for the purpose of tertiary study.”

Based on the aforementioned definitions, the term ‘international student’ is used essentially to refer to people who are studying in foreign educational institutions. This includes either those doing the long term or the short term programs. In this research we have chosen to focus only on those students who are engaged in long-term study programs. Therefore, we have excluded the short-term program students usually referred to as “exchange students”. Since the short-term students do not have too many classes to take, most of the time they do not experience the realities and pressure that regular or long-term students usually experience.

2.1.2 Adaptation/Adjustment

The terms adaptation and adjustment are often used interchangeably. And the definition is also subject to variation depending on the context.

In *Biology*, it is defined as an alteration or adjustment in structure or habits, by which a species or individual improves its condition in relationship to its environment. It is also defined as a change in structure, function, or behavior by which a species or individual improves its chance of survival in a specific environment.

In *Physiology*, adaptation is referred to as the responsive adjustment of a sense organ, such as the eye, to varying conditions, such as light intensity. It also extends to the 'change in behavior of a person or group in response to new or modified surroundings.

In this research we refer to adaptation as the change or modification that a person undergoes in order to suit new social, cultural, academic conditions or needs.

2.2 Cultural Adjustment

Undertaking studies abroad could be an exciting experience. Yet that experience could be marred with many other challenges, especially if the home country of the student is strikingly different from the host country in terms of cultural values, beliefs, behaviors, social practices, and education systems. Consequently, students are often faced with the fact that their academic performance as well as their physical and psychological well-being are negatively affected by the challenges related to the adjustment to those factors (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). The most common form of such a cultural stress is known as 'cultural shock' (Oberg, 1960) which results in the sudden loss of all or most of the familiar signs, symbols and everyday life practices they were used to in their home countries.

According to Stoyloff (1997) and Mustaffa & Ilias (2013), international students' adjustment process to the host country's culture is generally influenced by the following factors:

1. The cultural distance between the student's culture of origin and the host country's culture: This simply refers to the cultural differences existing between the host country and the student's home country. Scholars (Ward et al., 2001) agree that the greater the distance between the two cultures, the more difficult will be the adjustment.
2. The length of stay and the social support received in the host country: These factors also play a major role in the student's adjustment (Ward, 1997; Ward and Rana-Deuba, 1999). The length of stay - which refers to the duration of studies in the host country - is seen as a particularly fundamental factor in the process of adjustment. In fact, as time goes by, students become much more familiar with the host country's culture and, therefore, the level of discomfort they were initially confronted with upon entering the host country gradually decreases (Adler, 1975; Ward, Okura, Kennedy & Kojima, 1998; Ward &

Rana-Dueba, 1999).

3. Gender, age, education level and language proficiency as well as the student's past cross-cultural experience and level of self-esteem constitute other major factors believed to influence the adjustment process.

Based on the above information, cultural stress is mainly related to students' social and cultural background as well as their communication skills in the new culture.

2.3 Academic Adjustment

Academic systems may be similar across cultures, yet they are not completely identical since they are often adapted to the local realities of each country. This means that to be able to adapt to the new learning environment, international students have to alter their prior academic experiences once they enter into a new academic system. This necessity to adapt to a new education system is well explained by Ridley (2004):

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.

Adjusting to a new academic system also involves practices such as cheating and plagiarism. According to Jin and Cortazzi (as cited in Ridley, 2005:96), "every culture of learning offers an alternative perspective on how to do things academically." The cultures of some countries - especially collectivistic countries - do not place a great emphasis on the ownership of knowledge (Robinson, 1992). Students from such countries are therefore not very familiar with the concept of plagiarism and they are likely to think that sharing exam answers with a fellow classmate for instance is something normal. In individualistic countries like the United States however, such a practice within the academic system would be regarded as cheating.

Adapting academically also implies that international students have to learn how to adopt and adapt new and different relationships with instructors as well as classmates. This is particularly important because the student-teacher relationship is appreciated differently from country to country. In many Asian countries for example, the teacher is regarded as superior.

He remains the main authority of the classroom and students are accustomed to relying on him as the ultimate authority on the course subject (Robinson, 1992). He is even expected to have answer to everything. Students from such countries might feel shocked to hear a teacher telling them that he /she doesn't know everything. The student-teacher relationship in such countries is much more formal, and students are not expected to address the teacher by his or her first name.

In the West, for instance, students are usually encouraged to think independently; and it is common to hear teachers overtly admit that they do not always know the right answer. However, in other countries, especially East Asian countries, students who are usually accustomed to relying on the professor as a package of knowledge, might feel shocked to hear a teacher telling them he /she doesn't have answer to everything.

Compared to the formal Asian student-teacher relationship, the student-teacher relationship in many Western countries is pretty informal.

Taking the USA as an example, Robinson (1992) contends that this informality is due to the fact that the Americans emphasize a lot the value of equality. Therefore, teachers and students are considered equal in the classroom setting, and the formers can be addressed by their first name. Moreover, teachers receive students in their homes frequently to discuss or work on projects together.

2.4 Social Adjustment

In the field of psychology, social adjustment is defined as the psychological process of "getting along with the members of society as best one can." It is therefore an effort made by an individual to cope with new standards, new values and needs of a given society in order to be accepted.

Building social and interpersonal relations in society is both necessary and very challenging because we live in a society where each individual has a different personality, and where everyone forms a different opinion about each other.

Alternatively referring to it as social integration, Tinto (1975) contents that social adjustment involves the student "fitting in" the social community of the informal environment of the institution. It is such an important aspect for international students' success in the host country that unsuccessful social integration is the result of students' inability to gain

membership into the campus community, and it can lead to academic failure and withdrawal (Tinto, 1975).

With regard to the issue of students' adaptation, many researchers argued that participation in extracurricular activities could positively affect the lives of the students (Holland & Andre, 1987). By definition, extracurricular activities are programs that are not part of the regular school or curricular program. Also, they are structured in such a way that they can fulfill some pro-social mission or goal (Holland & Andre, 1987). Extracurricular activities can include participation sport teams, students clubs, tutoring, dancing or singing clubs, etc. Students can join those activities depending on their own motives and needs. Participation in those activities makes students feel like a part of their school community. It also gives members the opportunity to not only develop relationships with their peers, but to also to develop a variety of skills, such as leadership skills, communication skills, interpersonal relations skills as well as many other social skills. Viewed from that angle, international students can quicken their pace of adaptation to their learning environment abroad by actively taking part in the extracurricular activities offered by their schools.

III. Research Methodology

3.1 Participants and interview process

The interview for this study occurred in two phases. The first stage involved eight (08) international students with confirmed enrollments in undergraduate or postgraduate courses at NCHU. They were from five countries, namely Burkina Faso, St. Lucia, the Czech Republic, Russia, and Thailand. In order to solicit their participation in this study, the content of the invitation letter was posted on the Facebook page of NCHU's current international students. The Facebook page in question, which was monitored by the school's Office of International Affairs, was created with the purpose of reaching out to members of the international student community with regard to information related to their social and academic lives on campus. It is important to note the present study is not an Internet-Based Research (IBR). No online surveys, interviews or analysis of e-conversations such as chats or videoconferences were

used for this research. Therefore, ethical concerns with regard to Internet-Based Research do not, strictly speaking, apply here.

The second stage of the interview involved two staff and faculty members, namely the Dean of the school's Office of International Affairs (OIA) and the Director of the Counseling Center. They were sent a letter of invitation to participate in the study, and were later approached for a face-to-face interview after they had agreed to do so. There exists a vast body of literature indicating that international students usually display psychological, health, and social distress more than domestic students (Burns, 1991; Mullins, Qunitrell & Hancock, 1995). As a result, one may expect the international students community to make greater use of the school's health or counseling services. Yet, despite this evidence of increased psychological and social needs, little information exists as to whether the actual service usage rate by the international students is higher or lower than their local counterparts. The need to conduct this second-stage interview with these two staff and faculty members stemmed from our desire to better understand how frequently the international students went to the counseling center, and how the school attempted to support the emotional and psychological needs of the international students' community in general.

Prior to the interview, respondents were sent a copy of the questionnaire. The goal was to inform them about the purpose of the study and to enquire about their availability for an appointment at a mutually convenient time and location. Those who volunteered were then contacted for a face-to-face and semi-structured interview. To get them to speak more and to provide as much information as possible, respondents were asked supplementary subsequent questions depending on the answers they provided during the interview. Students who volunteered to participate did so because they believed the topic is an important one that affects them directly.

Each interview lasted from thirty to ninety minutes, and was conducted either in English, Chinese or French, depending on whichever language the interviewee felt most comfortable with for conversation. All interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the interviewees, and transcribed immediately after interview. During the recording, the statements made by the interviewees were briefly summarized or paraphrased back to them. The goal of such a procedure was to avoid misquoting the interviewee and to allow him or

her to verify and confirm that his or her statements could be used as data for this research. Besides audio recording, a few notes were also taken during the interview.

Major demographic and situational information obtained from participants include their nationality, Chinese and English language ability, age, gender, program of studies, length of stay in Taiwan, year of course, perceived academic progress, length of enrollment, studies in other Taiwanese universities prior to enrollment at NCHU, and any previous knowledge they had about the local culture before entering into Taiwan. Part of this demographic information is provided in the table below:

Table 1 **Basic information of participants**

No.	Case	Country	Age	Major / Specialty	Level / Title	Sex	Length of stay
1	A	Burkina Faso	25~30	Mechanical Engineering	Master	Male	2 years
2	B	Burkina Faso	25~30	Agribusiness	Bachelor	Male	4 years
3	C	Burkina Faso	25~30	Agribusiness	Bachelor	Male	3 years
4	D	Czech Republic	20~25	Electrical Engineering	Master	Male	2 years
5	E	Russia	20~25	Marketing	Master	Female	5 years
6	F	Saint Lucia	20~25	Agriculture	Bachelor	Female	2 years
7	G	Thailand	25~30	Soil protection	Doctoral	Male	3 years
8	H	Thailand	20~25	Economics	Master	Female	3 years
9	I	Taiwan	50	Counseling Center	Director	Female	50 years
10	J	Taiwan	60	Office of International Affairs	Dean	Male	60 years

Prior to their enrollment at NCHU, most of these students had got learning experiences from other Taiwanese universities. Some of them had spent a year in other Taiwanese schools either to study Mandarin or their previous bachelor or Master programs. Therefore, they were well positioned to tell whether the problems they were talking about in this research were typical to NCHU or whether they applied to the other universities they had frequented before.

3.2 Instrument

3.2.1 Semi-structured Interview

This qualitative study was based on face-to-face interviews conducted with 8 NCHU international students. After a careful review of the literature, a list of

semi-structured questions was arranged for that purpose. The semi-structured question style was used to get as much information as possible from students on matters of cultural adjustment, social adjustment, and academic adjustment.

Also, those questions were flexible, meaning that modifications did occur during the interview, depending on the reactions the interviewer got from the interviewees. The questionnaire was refined based on the constructive recommendations obtained from the project supervisor.

3.2.2 Participatory observation

The purpose of the participatory observation was to help the researcher acquire additional information about the atmosphere and dynamics that occurred when students and teachers interacted or when students and the school's administrative body interacted. These observations were carried out in three main areas: classrooms, the Office of International Affairs, and the Counseling Center where students were supposed to find help with their personal or academic problems. The researcher was given the chance to make two visits to the classrooms during class times with the purpose of getting a personal appreciation of the general atmosphere prevailing in the classrooms, and to see how some of the teachers actually lectured the international students.

Also, in order to connect with professional discussions in the area, the researcher has participated in a series of school-wide workshops and seminars led by the school's Counseling Center on the themes of 'internationalization' and "multiculturalism." He has also been solicited twice as a guest speaker on the issue of "internationalization and cultural shock on campus" to share his personal experiences as an international student in Taiwan. These activities were valuable opportunities for interaction and discussion on the issue of internationalization and intercultural awareness within the school. This helped the researcher get a balanced appreciation of part of the information collected with the respondents.

3.2.3 Researcher with proficient literacy in multi-language

The researcher can express himself fluently in French, English and Chinese. Therefore, given the different backgrounds and different language abilities of the interviewees, participants were given the possibility to express themselves either in

English, Chinese, or French, depending on which language they felt most comfortable to use for communication. In doing so, the researcher was making sure that as much information could be obtained from the participants as possible.

Thanks to his personal 7-year experience in translation (he has been providing translation services to different business companies located in the UK, the USA, Hong Kong, France, India, and Taiwan), the researcher was able to smoothly translate the messages of the people he interviewed for this research.

IV. Research Finding

Participants in this research had various types of adjustments to make when studying in Taiwan. These adjustments were mainly found at the cultural, social, and academic levels.

4.1 Cultural and Social Adjustment

To make new friends outside of their culture, it is a necessity for foreign students to change the way they socially interact with others. According to Haydon (2003), international students will have to adjust to customs, friendship building and dating etiquettes for them to successfully make new friends and enlarge their social network. Cultural and social adjustment constitutes a common challenge to all the respondents. The problem was found to be even more acute for the non-Asian respondents who often reported to have had high feelings of stress, strangeness, discomfort and homesickness within the Taiwanese cultural environment. This cultural stress stemmed not only from the feeling of missing loved ones, but most importantly, from the fact that the subjects were away from what was for them a familiar way of life.

Social adjustment largely depends on the perception we have of others and how we interpret their behaviors. Indeed, our response or reaction to others' behaviors is strongly influenced by what we think of them, what they think of us, and what they like.

From the perspective of interpersonal relations building, some of the international students reported that it was difficult for them to socialize with the local students. They mainly pointed to the shyness and reluctance of the latter to open to foreigners and to engage in direct dialogue for addressing misunderstanding. And while the local students interpreted

such an attitude as a way to avoid direct confrontation², the international students understood it as a lack of personal opinions.

If you have a small problem or misunderstanding with someone, like your classmates or even your girlfriend, instead of discussing the issue with you first, they may immediately go to tell other people first. It's like they don't have their own personal opinions. They always seek for peers' opinions (2012/12/07-E).

There are of course many factors that play a significant role in how successful one can make friends with people of the host country. Some people are very outgoing while others are quite reserved. And of course, there is nothing wrong with either personality traits. Some of the international students, as stated below, attributed their lack of local friends to their own personalities:

I don't have any Taiwanese friends. But I think they [local students] are nice and friendly. Some foreign students have managed to make friends with them, but not me. I am an introvert person. I usually spend most of my time alone doing my own stuff. So I can't blame anyone for that. It's my own personality (2012/12/14-B).

The way we socially perceive others strongly depends on the type of information we have initially obtained about them. An inaccurate knowledge about someone will lead us to misinterpret their behaviors and to mislabel them with stereotypes that can affect any possible interaction we will have with them. This paper found that the issue of social adjustment was more difficult for the West African respondents. The first reason that accounts for this situation was that their cultural practices somehow differ significantly from the Taiwanese culture. This has, to some extent, has initially contributed to increasing their feeling of strangeness and discomfort on the island.

² No local Taiwanese student was interviewed for this study. The above remark was made by some of the international students, mainly 2012/12/07-E, 2012/12/14-A, and 2012/12/18-D who - by dint of interacting with the local students - have come to the conclusion that the latter's reluctance to engage in open discussion of certain issues could be explained by their avoidance of direct confrontation. This explanation is much more of an outsider's perspective, and therefore does not exclude the necessity to interview local Taiwanese students for a more objective conclusion.

As you know, greeting is an important social value in my country. When you see someone - at least for the first time during the day - it is normal to greet them. You cannot pass by someone without greeting them, especially your co-workers, classmates, or teachers. Here in Taiwan, sometimes I initiate greetings that are not answered. I greet my classmates when I see them in class in the morning, but they seemed to be bothered sometimes. And unless I initiate the greeting, they don't do it. They just come in, sit together in small groups, start talking among themselves, play with their phones or do something else. I found it so weird in the beginning. Yes, I felt like the school environment did not have enough human warmth. And it was difficult for me to adjust to that (2012/12/14-A).

The importance of greeting in the African culture, as mentioned above, is corroborated by the Ghanaian writer Kwame Gyekye:

In African societies, human relations are highly valued. Greeting people one meets is an important element in enhancing human relations and in making people feel good about themselves. The greeting is considered a way of acknowledging the other person as a fellow human being. And a person may feel deeply hurt if you pass him by without greeting him. The failure to greet him would be regarded as a failure on your part to recognize that he shares your humanity. The recognition of individuals by the social act of greeting is therefore a social as well as a moral obligation (Gyekye, 1996:26).

From the above statements, one could easily understand why people from African countries have the tendency to call everyone “brother or sister” and to greet everyone they meet with a verbal salutation regardless of whether they have seen the person before or not: it is a way to let the other person know that we have more in common despite our individual differences, that we are all connected and evolving under the same umbrella of humanity, brotherhood, and interdependency.

Another reason why the West African respondents had hard times adjusting socially has to do with the fact that the local Taiwanese students seemed to have insufficient knowledge about the African continent in general.

I have a lot of Taiwanese friends. I think they are nice people, but I have to

admit that they ignore a lot about the rest of the world. They have so many stereotypes especially about people from Africa. So sometimes I really don't know how to talk with them. They seem to almost know nothing about Africa, not even the few African countries that still have diplomatic ties with Taiwan. See, most of them even think that Africa is a country...it makes me laugh sometimes (soft laughter) (2012/12/14-A).

More than the lack of knowledge of the African continent, what the respondents complained the most about was the fact that the Taiwanese people – in their attempt to satisfy their curiosity and learn about their foreign friends' home countries – do not often know how to ask questions appropriately. The African students in particular admitted that they were, in many instances, stunned to realize that they were being asked questions they wouldn't expect from children, let alone from grown-ups.

For example, they asked me if I have elephants, lions or giraffes in my house. They asked me if I wore shoes back home. In the beginning I thought they were just joking. But I came to realize that they were serious about it because many local people asked me the same thing. This is really shocking and embarrassing (2012/12/14-A)!

Sometimes it makes me feel uncomfortable to hear such things. I'm not saying they are supposed to know everything. But at least if you want to know about something, you have to know how to ask questions appropriately. That is very important in relationship building. You have to be emotionally intelligent; otherwise you will hurt the other person's feelings (2012/12/15-B).

From the above statements, it can be noted that the local Taiwanese people might not have chosen to deliberately hurt the feelings of their foreign friends. The inappropriateness of their actions or words as they interact with the foreigners had a lot to do with ignorance. In other words, it has to do with their not knowing how to ask the right questions. As Chow (2011) puts it, the lack of "cultural sensitivity" in Taiwan stems from a lack of sufficient information on the part of the local people:

What worries us is that Taiwanese people know different cultures should be respected but, mainly due to a lack of information; often do not know "how". If one has no basic understanding of the customs and taboos of different

cultures, one might harm friends without realizing it. There are numerous cases in this [Taiwanese] society of stereotyping foreigners or culturally inappropriate or insensitive languages and actions, particularly by the media (Chow, 2011:2).

Seen from this perspective, it is important to for the Taiwanese institutions of higher education to sure that their efforts in internationalizing their campuses are directed towards broadening the global perspective of their student population (both local and foreign) so as to foster a greater sense of respect and mutual enrichment.

4.2 Adjusting to Campus eating facilities

Another important area of social adjustment experienced by the international students had to do with the eating facilities available on campus. Campus eating facilities such as restaurants and cafeteria received different appreciations on the part of the international students. The non-Asian respondents - especially those for whom Taiwan represented the first destination abroad - admitted that they had hard time trying to adjust to the local cuisine. In general, the school restaurants were found to be less frequented by the international students. Three main reasons were given to account for this low level of frequentation: The price of the food, the variety of foods from which students could choose, and the way the food was served in those restaurants.

As far as the prices were concerned, some of the students complained that the prices were not fixed. As a result, students often found themselves into a state of confusion after they had been given what they referred to as “an arbitrary price”³, thus giving them the feeling that they had been overcharged:

I don't like going there because the price is not fixed. As students, we would like to know exactly how much we would spend when we go to eat. But when you go to the school restaurant with, say, 60 NT of spending in your mind, there are times you end up spending more after choosing your food. I don't know how they set the price but I think more information should be given as to how much each item on the menu costs.” (2012/12/14-B)

Because of the geographical proximities of Thailand and Taiwan, students from

³ Respondent 2012/12/08-F

Thailand asserted that they didn't have too much effort to do in terms of adjusting to the food. Their argument was that Thailand and Taiwan have a certain number of similarities on the cultural ground. However, they also thought that the price should be fixed or lowered.

I don't go to the school restaurant. It's more expensive than the outside restaurants (2012/12/18-G).

More than a price issue, the main reason why most international students didn't frequent the school eating facilities was a question of what was being offered and how it was served. The lack of variety was an important concern especially for international students who had been in Taiwan for less than a year.

It's almost always the same type of food that is offered. I don't like it that much. The Taiwanese food is often either too greasy or too sweet for me. Even the meat has a sweet taste. In the beginning, I used to go to the fast food restaurants. It's quite expensive, but I didn't have any choice (2012/12/14-C).

Students also complained about the fact that different foods at the school cafeteria were served using the same utensils. This was a major concern not just for the students who were Muslim, but also students who were allergic to certain types of food.

I took my friend there once, but he didn't like the way the food was served. They serve the food with the same spoons or materials. It's important to know that some people don't eat pork or seafood (2012/12/07-E).

4.3 Language Issue

There exists a positive correlation between cultural adjustment and strong social interaction with host nationals (Church, 1982). However, he who talks about social interaction also talks about language. And language ability, as Lewthwaite (1997) pointed out, plays an important role in the success of international students in the new culture. With regard to the major factors that influence the sociocultural adaptation of foreign students in a new culture, Ward and Rana-Deuba (1999) also argued that language competence and the amount of contact with the local people are very important. Mastering the language will not only increase the chance of understanding what instructors say; it will also help students get along with fellow classmates and staff members. Participants in this research said they had

a lot of adjustments to make while studying in Taiwan. These adjustments mainly included learning the Chinese language and adjusting to the local food.

Analyzed from this angle, conducting extracurricular activities seems to be the best way for international students to mingle with their local counterparts and build strong connections with them. Whereas this seems to be true, this research found out that it's challenging for international students to reach a satisfying level of social interaction through the agency of extracurricular activities. They did not enjoy that privilege as such. In fact, the majority of the interviewees had the feeling that they did not belong in this learning environment. This issue of feeling of connectedness to the university was mainly due to the language barrier between the international students and their local counterparts. Most of the interviewees were not fluent enough in Chinese; and most of the local students displayed a lack of confidence or some sort of timidity when it comes to expressing themselves in English.

The Chinese that I'm given here is just a survival Chinese. It's not enough to partake in activities that are fully conducted in Chinese. That will make me miss the essence of the activities in question. That's why I don't participate in them. There should be someone to translate ... maybe (2012/12/08-F).

I feel out of place for the extracurricular activities. Everything is in Chinese. If I go there, I will be like a simple spectator who is there just to watch instead of participating in what is going on. Sometimes when I have time, I join the activities that are offered for international students. But then, it's all about foreign students. It's not an opportunity to mingle with the locals (2012/12/20-H).

The school is indeed trying to increase the level of interaction between local students and international students. It does so by using various support systems. On top of offering extracurricular activities, there exist other vehicles such as the peer-pairing and residential programs designed to bring local and international students together. While some of the international students admitted that they made local friends as a result of sharing the same dormitories with Taiwanese students, practically no serious evaluation of the impact of these support programs has been made in Taiwan so far. This is something that should be done for a better efficiency.

The international students had different ways to grapple with these issues they encountered during their studies in Taiwan. The mechanisms used to face them depended not only on the personality of the individuals, but also on the number of students on campus sharing the same cultural values.

To handle those stereotypes I just joke with them. Sometimes, I don't even know how to explain to them. It's just too funny every time they asked me where I am from. I tell them, but they don't even know about my country. So now when they ask me where I'm from, I tell them that I'm a Taiwanese...From the Southern part of Taiwan. Sometimes they are surprised. Sometimes they laugh. The funny thing is that some of them even believe me, because they say that the South is so hot. And that's why I'm black. And we laugh together (Laughter) (2012/12/14-A).

According to the literature review, international students are inclined to stay in their peer groups with similar cultures. This does apply well to our respondents from Thailand. Students from Thailand constituted the largest community of the international students at NCHU at the time of the interview. And they were usually found together within their small groups. Those who participated in this research admitted to spend their time with their country mates more often than with the locals probably. The most common reason given was language barrier. With no immediate families to convey their needs and problems in Taiwan, these students mostly sought for support among themselves.

I don't feel homesick here. I have so many country mates here. We often go out together, speak our language, cook food from our country and eat it. I also call home often to talk with my family and friends. (2012/12/18-G)

The Office of International Affairs (OIA) - supposed to help the international students with their academic and social adjustment - was found to be limited in scope. By the time of the interview, it mainly served as a channel for the school to build relationships with other institutions, and to help the international students with advice on dormitory issues, course selection, visa, etc. Its members had neither the expertise nor the responsibility to handle the emotional or psychological difficulties which some of the international students faced on campus. The restricted scope of the services provided by the office of international affairs is well documented by the statement of its Dean:

Some foreign students have psychological problems. But the Office of International Affairs is not responsible for that. It is only responsible for dormitory stuff, visa, ARC, course selection, but not counseling or psychological assistance. (2013/1/8)

Though it was admitted that they had psychological needs⁴, practically none of the respondents referred to the school's counseling center for their problems. The main reasons advanced included lack of knowledge about the existence of such services, language barrier (as most staff members of the counseling center barely spoke English), and the lack of cross-culturally trained staff members for the counseling center. As a result, many international students who were struggling with psychological, emotional or cultural shock-related issues found it difficult to get proper assistance on campus, as confirmed by the words of the Director of the Counseling Center:

I think we need to promote the center more. Very few foreign students come here for assistance. They don't know about the existence of the center. They think the services provided here are just for local students. Also, our current counselors can't speak English well. Two or three international students came here before. Some had problem with the school's regulations. As you know, most of the school's regulations are only in Chinese and they can't read in Chinese. Another had a relationship problem. So it was emotional. But we often don't know how to help them because of their cultural differences. It takes time. (2013/1/9)

There are two main conclusions that can be drawn from the above findings. The first implication is that although international students experienced psychological and social distress, their use of the school's counseling services remained lower compared to what one

⁴ The interview was done in two phases. During the first phase, we failed to get from them the student respondents the reason why they chose not to frequent the counseling center for emotional and psychological support. A second interview with the Dean of the school's Office of International Affairs (OIA) and the Director of the Counseling Center revealed that many international students who expressed the need to talk about homesickness and culture shock could not find the required psychological support. These details were used to complement our previous findings.

would have expected. This confirms the finding of previous studies by Bergman & Misra (1997), and Kinoshita & Bowman (1998).

The second implication is that the lack of adequate support services and academic assistance - as evidenced by previous studies (Denroy, 2007; Chen, Liu & Abad, 2011) - constitutes one of the major social and academic challenges faced by international students within the Taiwanese institutions of higher education.

At a time the school is going international, and with regards to the peculiarities of the adjustment issues faced by the international students, it is high time that the counseling and student affairs divisions be also internationalized in terms of the services they provide. For a better efficiency, staff members of the counseling center should not just be equipped with English language and communication skills; they should also be offered sufficient training in cross-cultural awareness and intercultural understanding to ensure that they can really assist the diverse students. Only by doing so can we expect a different impact and an improvement in the social and academic lives of members of the international students' community.

Outside of the protective environment of their school, the international students reported that safety was not a significant issue during their stay in Taiwan.

4.4 Academic Adjustment

In terms of academic adjustments, five major areas were found: Adjusting to the language of instruction; adjusting to new teaching methods; adjusting to new and different student-teacher relationships; adjusting to the Chinese language classes; and adjusting to the campus eating facilities. Details on why these constituted adjustments issues to be overcome by the international students are given as follows:

4.4.1 Adapting to the language of instruction

Apart from adapting to a different academic system, international students in Taiwan also have to find ways to adjust to the language of instruction used in their respective schools. In fact, the language of instruction for the international programs is mostly English. Problems related to this aspect depended not only on the English ability of the students who are taking the class, but also on the English ability of the instructors in charge of teaching those programs.

My program is in English. Sometimes the teachers cannot explain very well

since English is not their native language. But I think I'm lucky. The textbooks are all in English, and since English is my first language, I have no particular problem with understanding the content. So I'm ok (2012/12/08-F).

While some were lucky enough to have their programs and class materials in English, some students were forced to take courses lectured either completely or partially in Chinese.

Almost everything is in Chinese. Some teachers make some effort to lecture in English for me to understand - at least giving the most important information in English. But some other teachers just speak in Chinese although they know I never studied Chinese before. So I have to spend all my time looking for the relevant information in English... Even the Facebook page of our department is in Chinese. All the students of the department are requested to be on that page so they can receive any timely or updated information about upcoming events or activities. But everything is in Chinese. And I feel embarrassed to always asked people to translate it for me. Maybe they should do some effort to briefly attach some English version at least about the essence of the message so that those who cannot read in Chinese could suffer less (2012/12/14-A).

4.4.1 Adapting to new teaching methods

The way of giving the courses also requires an adjustment from the students. The teaching and learning styles are quite different from those in their countries and thus require them to adapt.

PPT-based... Just reading PPT to students is not teaching. You have to explain more. I think sometimes they should go outside the textbook and talk about other stuff (2012/12/15-B).

The exams are mostly in the form of Multiple Choice Questions. They are easy to correct, but I think they should give us more essay questions. I feel like the system is undermining my analytical and critical thinking skills (2012/12/08-F).

The following student found it difficult to adjust to the system. She eventually chose to drop out and return to her home country.

I wasn't satisfied with my teachers. I also was not satisfied with some of my teachers of my former school as well. So I decided to stop taking my master's program here (2012/12/07-E).

The observations made during the participant observations within the classrooms revealed that most of the Taiwanese local teachers are highly qualified and very knowledgeable in their fields of expertise. In fact, the general Taiwanese education system - which is conducted in Chinese - is well reputed for its outstanding quality and is ranked high worldwide. The country is reputed for its high academic achievements in many fields such as engineering and the exact sciences. But the use of English as the medium of instruction constitutes a big challenge for most of the local Taiwanese teachers. Although many of them had studied abroad and probably in English speaking countries such as the USA, UK, Australia or Hong Kong, not all of them are equipped with what it takes to lecture fully in English. As a result, the quality of their teaching may not be the same as when they lecture in Chinese. Such is the observation made by the following student:

Most of the local teachers are great when they teach in Chinese. They can make jokes. They can be funny. They can explain more. They can give more examples to make themselves clear. But when they are 'forced' to teach in English, it's completely different. Most of them don't feel comfortable. And they will be tempted to rely more on the PPT. There are many details they cannot touch upon because of the language barrier. And so the foreign students who don't speak Chinese end up being dissatisfied (2012/12/15-B).

4.4.2 Adjusting to new and different student-teacher relationships

As far as the student-teacher relationship is concerned, the viewpoints of the respondents diverged depending on their program of studies and personality of the teachers. Therefore, while some reported that they enjoyed a friendly relationship with their local teachers, some of the respondents asserted that the relationship existing between them and their local teachers was only classroom-based.

I think it's more a classroom-based relationship. They are willing to provide me any assistance when I don't understand something about their lecture. Apart from that, nothing else (2012/12/08-F).

This semester I just have one teacher. I have a family-like atmosphere with him. In Thailand, the relationship between students and teachers is very formal. It's just an in-class or on-campus relationship. They have nothing to do with each other outside of school. But here in Taiwan I feel like my teacher is a father to me. We often eat together (2012/12/18-G).

Students who happened to be the only foreigners in their classroom were more likely to appreciate the relationship with their local teachers, as the latter were more inclined towards giving them more attention and special treatment such as providing them with English course materials in case the course was fully taught in Chinese.

4.4.3 Adapting to the Chinese language classes

In an attempt to facilitate the social and academic integration of the international students within the institutional environment, the school has decided to offer free Chinese classes to those foreign students who are interested in it. While this in itself is a good and laudable initiative, its implementation suffered from a number of inadequacies. All participants complain that the Chinese classes they were receiving were not appropriately given. The main problems were the materials used, and the grouping of the students in terms of their Chinese ability.

People in my Chinese class do not have the same level. Some speak fairly well already. But some are beginners just like me. Sometimes those who are just beginning feel intimidated by those who are a little bit advanced already (2012/12/08-F).

I started taking Chinese class with so many students. But most of them abandoned later on because it was not challenging enough for them. They surely want to learn more to improve their Chinese, but it's not challenging enough for them (2012/12/07-E).

Students in my class don't have the same motives. Some want to improve their reading, some want to improve their writing. And some others want to improve their speaking abilities. So we don't have the same motives for learning Chinese. So I think we shouldn't be put in the same classroom. It's not efficient (2012/12/20-H).

The above finding implies that the internationalization of the educational

environment, which comes as a direct consequence of globalization, entails that both the physical institutional environment as well as the types of services provided by the schools should follow the same pattern. In other words, services that used to be directed toward easing the social and academic lives of local students should be revised on a global scale so that they can meet the needs of both local and international.

V. Conclusion

It is important to mention that the sample used for this study is small, and that the results of the present study may not, strictly speaking, offer a complete depiction of the realities experienced by international students in the entire population of higher educational institutions in Taiwan. Future researchers may address this weakness by seeking to reach a greater and varied population of international students from different universities in Taiwan. The possibility of having international students who are too demanding and difficult to satisfy may not be overlooked. Still, the point of views expressed by the students who participated in this study suggest that the issues they have raised need to be addressed with adequate means. With the campuses absorbing more and more diverse background students and faculties, lack of understanding of each other's culture constitutes indeed a serious problem. Therefore, in their effort of advancing internationalization, Taiwanese institutions of higher education should understand that their ability to attend to the needs of the international students and help them accustom themselves to the Taiwanese social and educational milieu would strongly depend on their ability to empower the local students in particular with a broader global view. Only by providing real and sufficient information about the home countries of the foreign students can we expect to discard narrow-minded prejudice and cultivate a learning environment that is booming with mutual understanding, respect, and openness. In fact one of the priorities of international schools today should be their ability to produce school graduates that are fully equipped with what it takes to see the world from different perspectives. A greater effort in such a direction will eventually help the Taiwanese universities to raise their reputation, attract more international students, and provide a quality educational service to both local and international students.

VI. Recommendation

In the light of the findings, the following suggestions are made with the purpose to help schools assist international students in their process of adjusting to the Taiwanese social, cultural and educational environment:

6.1 Cultural and social integration

1. Provide a thorough cultural education to the students before and after they arrive in Taiwan. This can be done through short movies, documentaries, seminars and special orientations.
2. So far there exists no organized student association at NCHU. It is therefore important for the school to encourage the international students to form a well-organized association. This student body shall help welcome the new international students and provide them with relevant information as to how to facilitate their social integration in Taiwan in general and within the institutional environment in particular. Discussions could also be organized by that association to reinforce the connection between both local and international students by breaking the linguistic and cultural barriers between them. Finally, a well-organized student association can serve as a bridge between the school's administrative body and the international student community. The international students can use this channel to discuss their major concerns with the school. This can be very effective.
3. Local students from the foreign languages department may exercise and develop their talents in translation by volunteering to serve as translators for the international students during some of the extracurricular activities. This will also be an opportunity for them to widening and diversify their friendship network and to improve their intercultural and interpersonal relationship skills.
4. To better assist members of the international student community with their emotional and psychological needs, the school should provide staff members of the counseling center with the required training in cultural awareness as well as linguistic and intercultural communication skills.

6.2 Restaurants

1. The school should provide a greater variety of food in its restaurants.
2. Provide a written English-Chinese menu outside so the students can read and have an idea of what is being served and making sure that students have a clear idea of how much they are going to spend when choosing certain items. In other words, this means making sure that the price follows a certain standard well understood by the students.
3. Consider adding some foreign dishes to the restaurant menu. This might sound difficult, but it is in fact doable. Some of the international students are good at cooking. The school might ask for (foreign student) volunteers to teach the restaurant staff members how to cook some of their home dishes (if the ingredients can be found in Taiwan). The students will surely be glad to do that. Adding a foreign dish to the menu at least twice a week could help the international students who have freshly arrived to suffer less from food issues. At the same time, the local students are given the opportunity to enjoy foreign dishes on campus.
4. Make sure that the same forks or spoons are not used to serve different foods like pork, seafood, etc.

6.3 Chinese classes offering

1. Categorize the students according to their respective levels and make sure the classes are interesting and challenging enough for them. For this purpose, it would be important to use teaching materials and textbooks that are different from those the students might have used in the past. Using textbooks or supplements that students have used before might be found boring and unchallenging, especially if the students have to go over the same things.
2. Categorize the students according to their needs and motives: Those who want to improve their speaking, those who want to improve their writing and those who want to focus on reading should be arranged according to their needs if possible. They have to be divided according to their motives and levels, otherwise they might not be learning a lot.

6.4 Course content and methods

1. Encourage teachers to use a variety of teaching methods so as to meet the needs and learning habits of the diverse background students. A good balance should be found

between analytical or critical thinking and rote memorization.

2. English textbooks and supplement are good for international students. Those who are fluent in English can learn in an efficient way and those who are not good in English may skip Chinese translation between their mother tongue and English.

Appendix

Research Questionnaire

Note: This is a semi-structure questionnaire. To get them to speak more and to provide as much information as possible, respondents were asked supplementary subsequent questions depending on the answers they gave after they answered the questions below.

A. Background info: *country, age, education level, major, languages spoken*

1. Could you introduce yourself first? (*Nationality, major, department, age, education level, languages spoken*)
2. Would you mind shortly introducing your country to us?
3. How long have you been studying in Taiwan? Have you experienced any homesickness so far? If yes, what do you miss the most about your country?
4. What do you do when you feel homesick?
5. What are the main differences between your country and Taiwan?

B. Adaptation to the learning environment: *course content, curriculum, exams, teaching methods, relation with teachers and classmates*

1. (What is your field of studies?) Why did you choose that field?
2. What do you think about the course content? Does it meet your needs and expectations? If no, how would you like the course content to be?
3. Do you have any difficulties related to the teaching methods, and the way exams are done? What kind of suggestions would you like to make in order to improve that?
4. How does the examination and teaching methods from your country differ from the Taiwanese way?
5. What major differences have you discovered between the education system in your country and the one you are experienced in the Taiwanese schools?
6. What are the main challenges that you encountered in the Taiwanese educational environment?
7. What kind of help or assistance would be beneficial to you in this type of learning environment?

8. How much support do you get from your friends, classmates and teachers with regard to your course adaptation needs?
9. How would you describe the student-teacher relationships in Taiwan?
10. How would you describe the relationship that exists between you and your local classmates? Why is that?

C. Adaptation to the cultural environment

1. What are the main cultural challenges that you encountered in Taiwan? Have you overcome them yet? If yes, how did you manage to do so?
2. After being here for so long, what do you think is the most difficult thing to adapt to in Taiwan?
3. What specific problems have you experienced in terms of interpersonal adaptation (such as get along with other people)?
4. Do you have a lot of friends here in Taiwan? If yes what is your secret of making friends?
5. Do you like eating at the school restaurant? Why or why not? What do you think can be done to make it more appealing to international students?
6. Have you taken any Chinese classes while here? Why?
7. How does learning mandarin affect your process of integration in Taiwan?
8. Do you often participate in extracurricular activities here? Why and why not?

D. Global Impressions

1. In your opinion, what is your greatest advantage of studying in Taiwan?
2. What are your most unforgettable experiences so far about living and studying here in Taiwan? (Good & bad)
3. Would you recommend Taiwan to a friend for their studies? Why?
4. Do you have any particular suggestions or advice you would like to give to those who aspire to come to Taiwan for their studies?
5. Are you allowed to work while studying here in Taiwan? Would you like to do it if you were allowed? Why?
6. Do you have anything else you would like to share or talk about?

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國際學生在台灣的大學之適應歷程： 非洲學生觀點

巴祐寧 蔡文榮*

摘要

在已過這幾年中，有很多的國際學生來臺灣就讀學位，這是臺灣政府促銷自己的高等教育的成果。根據世界大學新聞(University World News)所稱，臺灣在2012年擴大招收了四萬名國際學生，2020年要增加到十五萬名。然而，來到臺灣各大學就讀的國際學生的適應歷程卻未必順遂，本研究為要幫助各大學瞭解國際學生所面臨的主要困難，並提供國際學生充足的協助，乃以國際學生在大學校園的適應歷程為研究主軸。

研究樣本為2012到2013年中興大學就讀的八名國際學生，透過參與式觀察與深度訪談蒐集資料，並輔以二名教職員之訪談以求符合三角檢證之訴求。研究結果發現，國際學生在文化適應、社交適應、課業適應三方面遭遇到重大的挑戰，而在課業適應上，可以進一步分為對教學語言的適應、對教學方式的適應、對新的師生關係的適應、對學校外在環境的適應等四類。本研究進一步發現上述的適應問題會因國際學生自身的文化背景而差異，而其家人與朋友則是其求助的主要來源。最後，本研究提供一些建議。

關鍵詞：國際學生、文化壓力、適應、訪談、臺灣