

Internationalization of Higher Education: Experiences of Intercultural Adaptation of International Students in Canada

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As globalization intensifies, Canada has accelerated its pace of the internationalization of higher education as an important strategic priority at the national and institutional levels. It has been promoted as a strategy to increase the number of international students in Canada and to promote educational and research collaborations. In particular, the recruitment of international students has become the most common top priority for many Canadian universities and colleges. As a result, international student enrollment at all levels reached 336,497 in 2014, placing Canada as the world's seventh most popular destination for international students (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2015). Some of the top source countries include China (33%), India (12%), South Korea (5.8%), France (5.7%), and Saudi Arabia (4%). While international students bring their language and culture to our campuses, adding to and enriching our educational environments, many also face challenges in integrating into Canadian academic environment (Guo & Chase, 2011). It is, therefore, the purpose of this article to examine experiences of intercultural adaptation with a focus on Chinese students as the largest group of international students in Canada. Findings of the research will shed light on how internationalization of higher education is experienced by international students on the ground as they adapt to a new academic environment in Canada.

Defining and Contextualizing Internationalization

Internationalization is often referred to as “the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education” (Knight, 2004, p. 11). According to Knight, internationalization is a multidimensional process involving international student mobility, exchanges of faculty, international linkages and partnerships, international academic programs, and research collaborations. She also points out that internationalization at the institutional level has been promoted as a way to achieve international academic standards for branding purposes, enhance the international and intercultural understanding and skills for students and staff, generate alternative sources of income, develop international strategic alliances, and foster international collaborations in research and knowledge production.

The Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), now Universities Canada, conducted a survey of its member institutions about the current state of internationalization in Canada (AUCC, 2014). The findings reveal that Canadian universities and colleges were deeply committed to internationalization, with 95% identify it as part of their strategic planning and 80% view it as one of their top five priorities. The recruitment of international students, particularly undergraduate students, was identified as the highest priority for internationalization. The AUCC survey shows that visa students represented approximately 11% of full-time undergraduate students and almost 28% of students at the graduate level in Canada. While Canada has been fairly successful in recruiting international students, research also shows that many international students encounter difficulties in transitioning into

the academic and social environments of the host society, such as isolation, marginalization, and depression (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Knight, 2015; Yang & Noels, 2013). It is necessary to further investigate the intercultural adaptation of international students in Canada, which forms the focus of the following section.

Researching Intercultural Adaptation

Intercultural adaptation is not a linear process. In this context, a qualitative study was conducted to investigate intercultural adaptations of international students in Canada, because many existing studies focus on American and British universities (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Liu, Sun, & Wang, 2010). The study combines personal interviews with focus groups involving eighteen international students primarily from China and three administrators from three post-secondary institutions in British Columbia. It was a deliberate choice to focus on Chinese students because, China provides one-third of the total number of international students in Canada. Hence, it is strategically important to understand their experiences of intercultural adaptation in Canada. Content analysis moves from specific to general, so particular instances are observed, then combined into a larger whole or general statement (Creswell, 2013). Three themes emerged from this study concerning students' culture shock, learning in an unfamiliar culture, and the importance of campus services and supports.

Culture Shock

Culture shock is often associated with feelings of isolation, frustration, homesickness, and depression that are experienced by newcomers when they transition into a new socio-cultural

environment (Jandt, 2007). Jarvis (2006) explains that disjuncture occurs when there is a gap and disharmony between the individual's biography and perception and construction of the experience of the external world. The culture shock of international students should be viewed in a broader context of transition shock, a phenomenon that leads to profound learning, growth and self-awareness (Kim, 2005). In the interviews, almost all Chinese students identified culture shock as being among the greatest challenges facing their adaptation process. Many participants indicated that everything is so different from what they expected, with a different language, culture, customs, and food. They also admitted that they lacked activities to engage in and thus felt bored, leading to a sense of isolation. One common challenge facing many Chinese students concerns difficulties of making friends with local Canadian students. One student states,

I am now living with a Canadian student as my roommate. In China, roommates are easy to become friends. My roommate is polite but seldom talks to me. I feel very lonely... I got homesickness from time to time...
(Student A)

Learning in an Unfamiliar Culture

Learning shock refers to difficult emotions and experiences that international students encounter when they adapt to a new learning environment (Gu, 2016). In this study, Chinese students experienced language difficulties as well as difficulties in adapting to a different curriculum and pedagogy. Several students also commented on the unfamiliar classroom norms, which prevent them from interacting with peers. With respect to language, it poses an enormous threat to understanding course materials properly and to their performance in class, which ultimately

affected their final grades. These situations raised students' anxiety and uncertainty in their new learning environments, which further held them back. One student notes:

I feel embarrassed when instructors use humor in class. There are so many terms I do not understand because I am not a native speaker. North American culture, especially Canadian hockey athletes, singers, or movie stars, sometimes were used by my instructors in their teaching...I felt frustrated to catch up with the class because of the difficulties of understanding their culture. (Student R)

One student also compared the Canadian system with China and indicated that there is more pressure to study here than in China. She says:

I feel pressure when I study here. Here, we have quizzes, assignments, and finals, and they have very good learning rhythms. And it is very fast, one after another. In China, finals take the greatest portion of our final grades. So we only study hard for the finals. The learning speed here is very challenging for me to follow. (Student C)

Campus Service

It is suggested that the twin processes of uncertainty and anxiety reduction are key mediating variables for enhancing intercultural adaptation (Hammer, Wiseman, Rasmussen, & Brusckhe, 1998). According to administrators, primary supporting services beyond academic learning are peer mentoring programs and cultural activities. Gaining information on unfamiliar environments via two-way communication instead of simply by media is more predictable and thus less anxiety-provoking for newcomers. Furthermore, a range of cultural activities may motivate international students to participate in the campus

community and enhance their sense of group inclusion. When asked about these services, most students indicated that the bilingual service is most helpful:

I remember once I went to student center for my assignment. I was not able to explain my concern because of language expression. Then they brought a bilingual tutor for me who speaks Mandarin. I felt so relieved and she solved all my questions about my assignment... For international students, language is the first thing... This kind of service is very important and good for our lives here. (Student J)

Another student commented on the cultural activities. She states:

They have different culture theme every time. For example, I learned a lot from the Mexican culture week and learn how to cook Korean food from the Korean week. I heard that Canada is a multicultural country and now I have seen this from my eyes. This is very impressive, it helps me make friends and reduce my homesickness. (Student G)

Concluding Thoughts

Three recommendations of this study are to provide workplace diversity training, hire more multilingual employees in student services, and engage international students in campus activity design and planning. Diversity training sensitizes employees on the proper way to treat people of culturally diverse backgrounds (Stephenson & Yorke, 2013). Furthermore, diversity training increases cultural awareness, knowledge, and communication. It can benefit an organization by preventing civil rights violations, increasing relationships among identity groups, and promoting better teamwork (Madera & Neal, 2011). This study also

supports the notion that hiring multilingual employees would lead to improved management of international students' anxiety and uncertainty related to intercultural adaptation. Given the diversity of international students' needs and interests, they can be engaged to create more inclusive learning environment.

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Biography

Jingzhou Liu is a doctoral student at the University of Calgary specializing in adult learning. Previously, she was a journalist and

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