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Sociocultural Adaptation
Among International Students in Thailand

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Abstract. Very little research has been done on the international student population which travels to Asia to further their education. Analyzing the adjustments demands placed on both students in Thailand may lead to a more stable and profitable educational institution. Reliable information regarding the push pull factors of educational tourism is both rare and valuable. This information will be used to advance the fields of educational tourism and will be incorporated in the treatment of anxiety or stress based disorders that may be a result of adjustment demands. Thus, the research aims to achieve goals in both psychology and educational fields.

1. Introduction

There is a relationship between university income and recruitment of international students. Taylor (2005) estimated that over a million students and scholars are currently studying or working abroad. The international student market is expected to increase annually and the youth and student segment accounts for over 20% of international arrivals in Thailand (UNWTO, 2008). Historically, the importance of the youth and student market has largely been ignored because of the assumption of its low market value; however, recognition of the youth and student segment and its importance has been steadily developing worldwide. Today, this large group requires special attention. Universities must make changes to accommodate the influx of students from outside the host country. As the global economy begins to shift from west to east and international student numbers increase in Asia, universities are competing to attract this lucrative student group. As the target market changes, so too does the variety and organization of services offered to these students. There is a particular need for Asian universities to adjust to students choosing to come to Asia for educational purposes. This process of institutional adaptation is referred to as the internationalization of education. Students coming to Thailand are immediately confronted with education differences in terms of linguistic patterns and socially entrenched social and educational hierarchies which are difficult for international students to adapt to as well as domestic issues such as the availability of western style toilets and easily accessible transportation. In essence this creates two environments of adaptation- organizational and cultural (Fan and Wanous, 2008). In regard to traveler adjustment, Kennedy has defined the concept as the ability to 'fit it' or the ability to effectively interact with the host culture (Ward and Kennedy, 1996).

Much of the previous research in cross-cultural studies analysed culture as the cause of maladjustment as opposed to the effect (Kirkman et al. 2006, and Tsui et al 2007). However,

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emerging research has begun to call into question this cultural stability paradigm (Adams, 2005 and Taras and Steele, 2010). Erez and Gati (2004) point out that the traditionally conceived unilateral causal approach may well be redefined as bidirectional. Therefore, students are not the only group which should adapt. Educators need to adapt to students from the traditional stereotyped Asian student role as passive to an interactive and participant based paradigm of learning that western students are familiar with. These differences create anxiety among both teachers and students, but they are not insurmountable

As international travellers these students learn to adapt to their new environment and cope with the new living and learning conditions. Some students respond well to the stress and develop the appropriate coping mechanisms necessary to adapt while other do not. Those students which have difficulties adjusting to the host culture can develop psychological issues associated with loneliness, isolation and dissatisfaction (Ward and Rana-Deuba, 2000) as well as educational issues such as failing coursework or the inability to develop proper language skills necessary to continue in that learning environment.

2. Expatriate and Student Adjustment Patterns

The study of cultural adaptation finds its' roots in anthropology, the colonial system and the need to properly understand and possibly prepare for sociocultural adaptation (Somekh and Lewin, 2005). As international business and international study become increasingly common, more parties become interested and find value in this area of research.

The study of international student groups and the issues concerned with these students has long been a topic of research in the academic community. In the 1950s there was more focus on the psychological issues associated with living abroad and the adaptive problems experienced by students (Ward, Bochner and Furnham, 2001). Much of the work done in this period focuses on the detrimental effects of exposure to a new culture. This was in line with the medical model of the same period.

The second wave of international research was a reflection of larger shifts in cognitive paradigms away from the positivist medical model towards an interpretivist approach which included analysis of culture learning and developing coping skills. This period also reflected changes in psychological theory which incorporated the ABC Triad (affect, behaviour and cognition) of cultural adjustment (Zhou et al. 2008). This new perspective saw individuals gradually adapting to and learning about a culture as opposed to being subjected to the rules of the culture and experiencing culture shock. This culture learning model led to training and preparing individuals prior to departure abroad. It was within this culture learning model that many of the variables in the Ward and Kennedy Sociocultural Adjustment Scale were studied in further detail. The effects of culture distance (Ward and Kennedy 1993a) and language competence (Furnham, 1993) and cultural identity (Ward and Searle, 1991) are of particular interest and exemplify variable analysis and validity in acculturation research.

The approaches to international student adjustment have gradually transitioned from the medical model to the psychological adaptation approach which is more comprehensive and assumes acculturation is a process which gradually occurs over time as opposed to a shocking state a traveler suddenly finds oneself in. It analyzes the process of actively learning to live in a culture as opposed to reactive subjugation. Early work by Bandura (1977) introduced social learning theory and Hofstede's (1984) work on culture distance began the studies of cultural novelty and adjustment where the greater the difference of culture between the country of origin and the host country, the more difficulty adjustment becomes (Black and Mendenhall, 1991). The dissimilarity of social behavior deemed appropriate at home and in the host country is further support for the degree to which students experience anxiety and can become an impediment to proper adjustment. However, there is still no single theory which synthesizes relevant research on student acculturative processes.

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3. Internationalization and Cultural Adjustment

There are many dimensions in enhancing the internationalization of an institution, but student retention is a fundamental aspect of the internationalization process. There is also great diversity in acceptable definitions and meanings of 'internationalization'. This research will use the working definition developed by DeWit and Knight who claimed "Internationalization of higher education is the process of integrating and international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research and service functions of the institution" (1994).

Knowledge and information about this in Asia and Thailand in particular is limited, therefore it is critical that researchers, teachers and service support staff within higher education institutions understand what factors are involved in student perception of and reaction to Thailand including student stress, anxiety, adjustment and their overall impression of life in the host country. While many students are conceptually aware of culture shock very few have been briefed on acculturation. Research in acculturation is far different from that of culture shock. In regard to culture shock, Janssens (1995) identifies four stages namely; stage 1 is the honeymoon stage, stage 2 is the negative experience and escalating problems stage, stage 3 is the adjustment stage and stage 4 is the mastery stage which occurs between 1 and 1 and a half years abroad. However, most international students do not spend that much time abroad, as such research on stage 2 and 3 are of primary importance to this researcher. The negative experience and adjustment period is of primary importance in this study. The analysis of adjustment and the factors which constitute international adjustment and adaptation can be divided into two areas; psychological (emotion) and sociocultural (behavioural) (Ward and Kennedy, 1999).

The focus of this current work aims at identifying specific stressors which impeded proper adjustment or negatively influenced students' experience while studying abroad. The early research of Berry and associates proposed the concept of psychological acculturation as two dimensional; maintenance of original culture and maintenance of relationships with new groups. Berry et al. (1989) further divided these dimensional responses and identified four acculturative strategies: integration, separation, assimilation, and marginalization. Those who implement an integration based strategy value both maintenance of original culture as well as maintenance of intergroup relationships. Travellers who apply a separatist position choose to value cultural maintenance but not intergroup relationships. Those who value intergroup relations but are somewhat undaunted with cultural maintenance experience assimilation and those who do not value cultural maintenance or intergroup relations are seen as marginalized (Ibid). The researchers involved in acculturation studies identified many factors involved in adjustment and analysed macrosociopolitical indicators. Berry's complex categorical or multidimensional model of acculturation gradually redefined our views of this process and explored individual personality traits influence on cultural adaptation. This conceptualization of acculturation allowed individuals multiple cultural affiliations with the host culture without necessarily limiting or reducing any identification with their culture of origin (Swagler and Jome, 2005). This led to social identity theory which explored individual perception of self and personal identity (Phinney, 1990) in comparison to host nation attitudes of self and personal identity.

Following Berry, Wards' research began to explore those travellers who voluntarily visited new cultures and investigated the elements of culture shock. Searle and Ward (1990) argued that psychological or sociocultural adjustment is the natural outcome of acculturation. They separated the psychological element as being the satisfaction in the new culture and ability to deal with stress, whereas the sociocultural adjustment refers to fitting in or learning the social rules with the host culture. Psychological adjustment is far more complicated as there are many variables which influence an individuals' adjustment. Sociocultural adjustment can be measured in terms of how individuals perform in daily tasks in a new culture (Ibid). Defining important terms such as

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'adjustment' has proven difficult although adaptation, acculturation and accommodation have all been used to describe the same process (Ward and Searle, 1991).

4. Adjustment Problems with International Students

The belief that problems occur because travelers have difficulty adjusting to or negotiating daily encounters in their host environment follows a social learning theory perspective (Searle and Ward, 1990). International students experience more psychological distress than local students. According to the research done by Williams (2007) on university students "the most commonly identified concern was anxiety, followed by stress and depression" however, there is no recent research on international students in Thailand which supports this claim.

Sociocultural and psychological adaptation to crosscultural transition is varied and can have a profound influence on experiences in a foreign nation regardless of the travellers' role as an employee, student or volunteer. Ward and Kennedy grounded much of their early work on acculturation with the understanding it is the "psychological and behavioural changes that an individual experiences as a result of sustained contact with members of other cultural groups" (Ward and Kennedy 1994 p.330).

A superficial analysis of international student retention reveals that men are more likely to experience sociocultural adjustment, as are the extroverted. Furthermore, it has been observed by the author that Western students experience healthier adjustment than their Southeast Asian counterparts regardless of gender. While this may be due to perceived discrimination, it runs opposite to theories of 'cultural fit' (Searle and Ward, 1990). This is important as it will establish the existence of sub-group discrimination among international students.

There is a need for more research on international students in higher education in Asia. This research project is focusing on student adjustment, concerns, and needs for the purpose of improving academic and support services for these students. The specific purpose is to determine the level of satisfaction while studying at an international college in Thailand.

5. Research Questions

1) What personal demographic factors characterize the current international student group?

2) To what extent does country of origin influence the extent of student adaptation?

3) What is the overall level of international student socio-cultural adaptation?

4) Which elements of the sociocultural adaptation scale are involved in adjustment difficulty?

5) What are the most stressful and most rewarding experiences in country?

6. Long-Term Research Plan:

Exploration of the elements which cause international student anxiety in Thailand is paramount to improving the quality of services offered. Grounded theory is of particular significance as this methodology is an excellent blend of philosophical and theoretical insight into a long term research project of academic significance and social impact (Corbin, 2005). Research which focuses on international student adjustment to Thai society, academics and learning environment is limited. Corbin states grounded theory is "theory development based on actual data gathered through qualitative research" (p.49). Theoretical development in educational development and cross cultural adaptation should come from grounded data collected from a representative sample of the student population which is being studied, in this case, international students at Thai universities. The first year of data collection should prove sufficient as a base to further explore sociocultural adjustment to international schools in Thailand as grounded theory allows for development of theory through data collection. An interesting example of grounded theory's application to

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international students can be found in Weiderman and Bluml's (2009) work which stated that it is a "method of constant comparisons by determinative and reflective forms of interpretation against different horizons of comparison within the framework of relational hermeneutics" (p. S90). The explanation and interpretation of data collected from international students will be used as a guide to create theory.

7. Method—Part One: Theoretical Sampling

Subjects were drawn from a large international college based in Nakhon Pathom, Thailand. Subjects ranged in age from 17-30 and most were non-married unemployed students. Collecting the first set of data began in November 2011. The initial experimental method used for this research is based on Ward and Kennedy's Sociocultural Adjustment Scale which is a quantitative and longitudinal analysis which will be implemented periodically as the subjects will be given the survey at the end of each semester. This survey uses a 5 point Likert scale and has been slightly adapted for use in Thailand (see Appendix 1). The original development of the sociocultural adaptation scale came from Furnham and Bochner (1982) and was modified for many travelers samples and has proven reliable and valid (Searle and Ward, 1990; Ward and Kennedy, 1993b). This version contains 30 items scored (from 1 corresponding to no difficulty and 5 corresponding to extreme difficulty) and two open ended questions based on rewarding/stressful experiences in Thailand.

International students are given the questionnaire regardless of their region of origin, age, gender, or language. The essential qualifying variable is birth abroad and intent to return to their homeland. The results in this article are the product of the initial stage of quantitative survey based enquiry. Following one year of collecting surveys from an expected 250 students at Mahidol University International College the author intends to continue furthering the present study through the use of grounded theory.

8. Procedure

Both pre-existing and incoming undergraduate international students will be given the Socio-cultural Adaptation Scale as developed by Ward and Kennedy as a survey on adjustment during week eight and nine of an eleven week term which is followed by two weeks of scheduled exams. This particular time was chosen to disseminate the questionnaire as all students are finished with midterm examinations and have yet to begin preparation for final examinations. Another factor regarding the choice of this time was to conform to previous research which concluded that 'the greatest difficulties are experienced at the earliest stages of cross cultural transition" (Ward and Kennedy, 1996a, p.661). The intention was to ensure that all participants had been in country for at least two months and decrease any impact of academic stressors on overall consideration of sociocultural adjustment.

All subjects were handed a survey distributed by fellow students and asked to return the surveys to either the initial contact or to the social science mailbox of this researcher. Participation in the research was anonymous and voluntary and subjects were asked to return the survey within one week. One hundred questionnaires were distributed and 70 were returned.

9. Results

The first three categories did not follow the Likert scale. Each was coded based on the respondents' background. For example, in regard to gender '1' was used for men whereas '2' for women. The region of origin was divided into 6 regions and length of stay was further divided in 4 periods of time. All survey data was analyzed using SPSS. This initial inquiry into sociocultural adaptation was done using descriptive statistics and following a grounded theory approach, I have begun to analyze the data using cross-tabulation in search of more noteworthy relationships among variables. This survey yielded some interesting results.

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The most difficult experience reported for the international students was related to dealing with unsatisfactory service (3.14 out of 5) followed by political understanding (3.09 out of 5) and dealing with the Thai bureaucracy (2.93 out of 5). It should be noted that the 3.14 is considered of moderate difficulty. This researcher expected higher results for some areas such as the transport system, but overall the international students surveyed generally reported positive experiences in Thailand. The least difficult experiences reported were shopping (1.57 out of 5) accommodation (1.76 out of 5) and classes or coursework (1.99 out of 5)

In regard to gender differences in acculturation, men found dealing with authority (2. 84), bureaucracy (3.03), political understanding (3.09) and unsatisfactory service (2.97) moderately difficult, whereas the female students reported understanding the Thai point of view, understanding jokes and humor and making oneself understood (2.97 respectively) and unsatisfactory service (3.29). Overall there was no statistically significant difference within the comparisons of gender and social adjustment.

The previous assumption that western students would find adapting to Thailand easier than Asian students was not supported in this initial study.

The SPSS produced descriptive statistics have been provided below. All of other inquiries regarding the statistics used in this paper can be accessed by contacting the author.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	70	1	2	1.54	.502
Region of Origin	67	1	6	2.88	1.493
Length of Stay in Thailand	70	1	4	2.84	1.270
Native Language	69	1	4	2.28	.983
Making Friends	70	1	5	2.36	1.252
Finding Enjoyable Food	70	1	5	2.11	1.174
Rules and Regulations	70	1	5	2.33	1.164
Dealing with Authority	70	1	5	2.60	1.256
Taking a Thai perspective	70	1	4	2.47	1.059
Transport system	70	1	5	2.21	1.089
Bureaucracy	70	1	5	2.93	1.300
Thai Value system	70	1	5	2.63	1.052
Making yourself understood	70	1	5	2.76	1.042
Point of View	70	1	5	2.77	1.079
Shopping	70	1	4	1.57	.809
Dealing with the Unpleasant	70	1	5	2.79	1.190
Jokes and Humor	70	1	5	2.84	1.187
Accomodation	70	1	4	1.76	.999
Social Gatherings	70	1	5	2.51	1.305
Staring	70	1	5	2.26	1.099
Ethnic Communication	70	1	5	2.19	1.183
Understanding ethnic diff	70	1	5	2.13	.992

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Unsatisfactory service	70	1	5	3.14	1.311
Worship	70	1	5	2.50	1.422
Relating to the opp sex	70	1	5	2.11	1.149
Finding your way around	70	1	5	2.37	.981
Political Understanding	70	1	5	3.09	1.282
Talking about yourself	70	1	5	2.16	1.085
Climate	70	1	5	2.10	1.144
Understanding the ThaiView	70	1	5	2.67	1.018
Family Relationships	70	1	5	2.01	1.136
Pace of Life	70	1	5	2.09	1.046
2 sides of a cultural issue	70	1	5	2.00	.948
Classes at MUIC	70	1	5	1.99	1.070
Valid N (listwise)	67				

The most common comments on the open-ended question at the end of the survey regarding stressful or anxious experiences related to taxis and traffic issues. Many of the respondents commented on the anxiety of "being ripped off" or "crazy drivers who do not use the meter". By far, almost 20% of the respondents had complaints related to traffic, taxis and tuk-tuk drivers. Others complained of the dual pricing system and being overcharged for goods that they claimed Thais paid less for. This dual pricing system is only legal in Thailand for cultural events (Muay Thai boxing or entrance to a national park for example) but it is abused by merchants and taxi drivers which results in many foreigners not knowing the local value of goods and services. The next most commonly reported source of stress/anxiety was the student visa process, dealing with immigration officials and visa documentation required which I can assume accounts for the relatively high score when measuring the Thai bureaucracy (2.93 out of 5). Another source of anxiety is the administration and student affairs officers which "giggle at English speakers" and "laugh at us" which in Thailand is a sign of discomfort. This Thai discomfort with using English is expressed in the smile which is then misinterpreted by the students as disrespectful or to quote another respondent "they are laughing at me when I need help". This cultural miscommunication may account for the relatively high unsatisfactory service (3.14 out of 5) report. This lack of English coupled with the fact that most of the clubs and after hours activities are in conducted using Thai language alienates the international students. One student wrote "MUIC is supposed to an English speaking institution but everything is in Thai".

The responses regarding the most rewarding experiences in Thailand were more varied. Many reported their interaction with Thais as the most rewarding. Others wrote about experiencing a foreign culture and a new group of people. There were rather generalized tourism based experiences of enjoying the weather and nice beaches as opposed to the anxiety based comments which were very specific. The tourism authority of Thailand would be proud to know that sun, surf and shopping are still the main pull factors when enjoying life in Thailand.

10. Limitations

One of the main limitations of this research is the lack of generalizability of the results as the adjustment of multiple nationalities to a unique Thai university occurs within a very specific cross cultural milieu. Another important limitation is the lack of longitudinal data to confirm trends found in this initial survey. As previously state, adjustment to a new culture is a process which is

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dependent on time and individual identity traits. Individual personality traits were not assessed prior to coming to Thailand and previous overseas experience was also not accounted for within this sociocultural adjustment scale. Further research using grounded theory should begin to analyze and account for the affect of subgroups on individual acculturation as well as attitudes of host culture distance from the subjects' homeland. Pantelidou and Craig (2006) concluded that social support (both size and diversity) among international students is associated with levels of distress and adjustment, but this variable was not explored in this research. Another limitation of this research is the inability to identify sub-group discrimination which is identified in interviews and in the open-ended questions added to this survey but has not been further explored in Thailand. This author suspects that students of western origin are given higher social status and prestige when compared to students of other SE Asian nations.

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