

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT PROBLEMS AT UNIVERSITY: A CRITICAL LITERATURE REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Adaptation to the new environment is critical for international students' successful engagement with their learning at university. Identifying factors that influence their adaptation will be of great significance to help improve their adjustment. This paper critically reviews previous literature that investigated issues that hinder international undergraduate students' adaptation at university. The literature search was carried out across four databases, i.e. Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), British Education Index (BEI), Australian Education Index (AEI) and Scopus, by drawing on techniques adopted in both systematic literature review and naturalistic literature review. The problems identified in the literature are categorized into five groups: personal psychological issues, academic issues, socio-cultural issues, general living issues and English language proficiency, among which English language proficiency, financial problem, academic progress and homesickness seem to face most international students, though there has not been a consensus yet among researchers about the magnitude of these problems.

Keywords: International students, undergraduate students, adjustment issues

INTRODUCTION

With the brisk pace of economic globalization, higher education is becoming more internationalized as well. An increasing number of students choose to receive higher education abroad in countries like the US, the UK and Australia, where there are many world-class universities that are expected to provide high-quality education for both domestic and overseas students. However, due to various reasons, and often out of their expectation, international students inevitably meet kinds of problems and difficulties that hinder them from integrating with the new environment, which more often than not heavily impacts their life and learning at university. Therefore, research into such problems is of vital importance for their successful adjustment to the new circumstances. This review attempts to shed light on problems that hamper international undergraduate students' adaptation at university. It critically discusses the published literature in relation to the following question: what are the problems that international students usually encounter in the course of adapting to the new environment at university?

Scope

'International student' is a broad term and can be used to refer to different groups of students such as undergraduates, postgraduates, short-term exchange students and so fourth. Since these groups vary a lot in terms of age, personal experience, curriculum structure and many other aspects, a full review of literature covering all these groups would be an enormous task and seem an unrealistic goal for a paper of a few thousand words. Therefore, this review

restricts its attention to works about undergraduate students, who study in English-speaking countries such as the US, the UK and Australia.

The Process of Choosing the Literature Sources

The search of literature drew on techniques adopted in both systematic literature review and naturalistic literature review. For example, a set of criteria for inclusion and exclusion were used to narrow down the search results, and then the abstract, introduction and conclusion of these works were read so that they could be grouped according to their relevance to the review question.

Specifically, Google search engine was used, and four databases were searched as well: Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), British Education Index (BEI), Australian Education Index (AEI) and Scopus, with the following search terms: international students, concerns OR problems, adjustment OR adaptation, universit* OR college*. The first three terms were keywords of this study and the last one helped to narrow down the scope of the search. Owing to different settings of the databases, either 'Abstract' or 'Title-Abstract-Keywords' was chosen as the area(s) where the search terms would appear because 'Keywords' often indicate the basic content of a study and 'Abstract' usually contains most keywords. Since the search terms were rather concrete, to identify enough literature relevant to the topic, no limits were set on other search parameters like document type or publication dates. The criteria for inclusion or exclusion of literature were as follows:

Table 1. Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of literature

Inclusion	All date	English language	Undergraduate students
Exclusion	N.A.	Non-English language	Postgraduate or exchange students

Judged by the titles or abstracts of the search results, some works were discarded. The rest works were then read and further grouped into key articles and relevant articles according to their relevance.

CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction to the Literature

Adjustment issues of international students have been studied for decades in the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Researchers from different countries have listed a number of problems and difficulties international students may encounter while studying at a foreign university. For example, in Australia, Samuelowicz's (1987) comparative study of perceptions of learning problems held by academic staff and international students, although old, is viewed as a landmark in the research of adjustment issues. Similarly, Burns (1991) highlighted problems facing international students by comparing the international group with their Australian counterparts. In the UK, Li & Kaye (1998) not only identified international students' concerns and problems but also analyzed the interactions between them. In the US, Anderson et al. (2009) summarized distinct needs and issues of international students studying in America.

There are some other works that have a bearing on the review question. For example, Barker et al. (1991) explored difficulties of overseas students in social and academic situations via two distinct studies conducted in the University of Queensland. Niven (1987) considered how institutions in Britain could provide better services for international students, which in the long run would benefit not only the institutions themselves but the reputation of British higher education. Ramsay et al. (1999) focused on first-year students' academic adjustment

and learning processes in an Australian university by comparing international and local students. Kennedy (1995) discussed how to develop a curriculum guarantee for overseas students regarding their concerns and needs. Robertson et al. (2000) investigated international students' and staff's perceptions of the learning environment at an Australian university. Lin and Yi (1997) provided an overview of common stressors Asian students often experience in the US and offered relevant programme suggestions. Tseng and Newton's (2002) research concentrated on international students' strategies for well-being at an American university. Olivas and Li (2006) tried to understand stressors and coping strategies of international students in the US and relevant counseling issues. Galloway and Jenkins (2009) compared international students' and administrative perceptions of adjustment problems at two private, religiously affiliated American universities.

Main Claims Relevant To the Review Question

After summarizing previous literature, Samuelowicz (1987) indicated that international students faced the following difficulties: 'English language proficiency, coping with the Australian educational system and its demands, cultural adjustment to life in a foreign country' (p. 121) and making good use of support services. On the basis of her own research, she added another two difficulties: ineffective or inappropriate study approaches and poor participation in group discussion. She characterized the learning approaches of international students, mainly Asian students, as learning by rote or relying heavily on memorization and less on understanding, thinking and argument. She also attributed international students' poor participation in group discussion to their previous education style, i.e. passive learning.

Burns (1991) extended Samuelowicz's (1987) research in a significant way (Kennedy, 1995). He compared a group consisted of first-year international students from a number of countries with a group of first-year Australian students, and argued that overseas students tended to have such problems as lack of finance, English language problems, tertiary study method requirements, personal worries, lack of support networks, social isolation and cultural adjustment. He also stressed the 'study shock' (p. 74) facing international students, which may result from lack of critical thinking skills and independent study skills, learning by memorization or replication, and different ways of structuring academic writing (loose, holistic, circular argument structure adopted by Asian students vs. logical, linear argument structure based on marshalling data preferred in western society).

In a more recent study by Li & Kaye (1998), international students were asked to rank eight potential problems: financial problem, mixing with UK students, academic progress, English language proficiency, accommodation, teaching and tutoring, homesickness and isolation. The authors then discussed different rankings of these problems according to students' nationalities, sex, age and academic areas. Interactions between the problems were also analyzed. Findings of this study indicated that, first, 'in general, the difficulties faced by students from Asia and other developing countries are more intense than those of Western European students' (p. 48); secondly, financial problem ranked top for students of all groups, followed by mixing with UK students, academic progress and English language problem. Besides, the strongest interaction was between English language and homesickness; and next came the interaction between English language and mixing with UK students. Moreover, all problems except mixing with UK students and homesickness had a statistically significant association with academic progress, but this, in the authors' opinion, did not indicate a simple casual relationship.

In the US, Anderson et al. (2009) argued that adjustment issues of international students could be viewed from five main aspects: psychological issues (e.g. homesickness, isolation, loneliness, hopelessness, helplessness, frustration, depression), academic issues (e.g.

language and communication, difficulty in adjust to the academic culture, use of library structures and services), sociocultural issues (e.g. cultural shock, cultural fatigue, racial discrimination), residential transition challenges (e.g. counseling and health services, documentation issues, dietary restrictions) and career development issues.

Strengths and Limitations of the Above Claims

After introducing the mains claims in these studies, the strengths and limitations of them will be discussed in this section. Samuelowicz's (1987) study was backed up by data from both academic staff of different departments and international students on different courses across the university. Such data sources allowed her to view adjustment issues from two distinct perspectives, thus gaining a deeper insight. One of its limitations is that international students 'were treated as a homogeneous group' (Li & Kaye 1998, p. 43); this is true in many other studies (e.g. Elsey, 1990; Niven, 1987; Kennedy, 1995). In contrast, Burns (1991) and Li & Kaye (1998) paid particular attention to other indicators such as nationality, ethnicity and age, etc. that differentiated some international students from others. Besides, although Samuelowicz (1987) 'identified a number of learning problems[,] but these were decontextualised from thoughts, hopes, feelings and aspirations of students themselves' (Kennedy 1995, p. 39). The true value of Burns' (1991) study is that it extends the work of Samuelowicz (1987) and provides a much more holistic picture of overseas student life than does Samuelowicz's (1987) (Kennedy 1995). However, Burns' (1991) study is not problem-free. His study only focused on first-year international students who might encounter problems different from those that second-year or third-year students might meet. And this could lead to a partial view of problems facing all international students. Another potential deficiency is related with the composition of his sample. While the international student group in the sample consisted of students from different countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Hong Kong and other countries in the world, 78% of them came from the Singapore-Malaysia region. Moreover, 60% of the Malaysians were Chinese, all Hong Kong students and 36 of the 38 Singapore students were Chinese as well. This imbalanced composition may negatively impact the representativeness of the results.

Many researchers have overlooked the interactions between the problems. Both Samuelowicz (1987) and Burns (1991) did not mention this aspect. By contrast, a few others attempted to explore such interactions. Niven (1987) discussed interactions between international students' academic progress and other problems they encountered in their life; Li & Kaye (1998) analyzed the interactions between eight adjustment problems listed on their survey questionnaire. A strong point of Li & Kaye's (1998) study is that they grouped their sample via such indicators as nationalities, sex, age and academic area to see if there were any significant differences between the groups in terms of perceptions of the adjustment problems. However, like Burns (1991), Li & Kaye (1998) did not consider academic staff's view about problems facing international students. And in their study, students' nationalities were presented as 'Asia and others [other developing countries]' and 'Western Europe', which, in my opinion, was not specific enough.

There are some common limitations of the three studies discussed above. For instance, questionnaire survey was the only method they adopted to collect data, and they 'would have benefited from additional detailed case studies that would have highlighted the more human side of overseas student life' (Kennedy 1995, p. 39), if some other methods like interview or focus group had been used. In addition, all three studies limited their samples to a single institution, and respondents' opinions were collected at a certain moment rather than at different times over a period. Therefore, as Li & Kaye (1998) suggested, research across institutions and longitudinal research could be conducted in the future.

A shining point in Anderson et al.'s (2009) work is that problems facing international students in the US were categorized and discussed, and theoretical frameworks were recommended to help better understand students' adjustment issues.

Summary of the Problems and Their Magnitude

Having discussed the pros and cons of the previous literature, we now attempt to answer the review question in this part. Some researchers have put problems facing international students into different groups (e.g. Anderson et al., 2009; Li & Kaye, 1998; Tseng & Newton, 2002). They are summarized below in Table 2. Although this is far from a thorough list, it can help us understand the adjustment issues with some insight.

Table 2. Summary of problems facing international students

<i>Category</i>	<i>Specific problems</i>
Personal psychological issues	Homesickness, loneliness, stress, depression, frustration, loss of status or identity, anxiety, confusion, etc.
Academic issues	Academic progress, academic demands, lack of understanding of the American educational system, lack of effective learning skills for gaining academic success, difficulties in using educational supportive services (e.g. library, academic counseling services), etc.
Sociocultural issues	Cultural shock, cultural fatigue, stereotyping, prejudice, racial discrimination, difficulties in adjusting to new social/cultural customs, norms and regulations and participating in intercultural/social activities, relationship problems, etc.
General living issues	Accommodation difficulties, difficulties in using student support services, financial stress, dietary restrictions, safety threats, etc.
English language proficiency	Difficulties in communicating with native speakers, understanding lectures, writing up essays, etc.

'While there is a general consensus by many researchers on the bulk of adjustment issues, there are some discrepancies in the magnitude of each' (Olivas & Li 2006, p. 1). For example, Niven (1987) held that academic progress was the dominant problem among all problems, while in Li & Kaye's (1998) study, academic progress only ranked third. Other researchers (e.g. Elsey, 1990; Kirby et al., 1999; Robertson et al., 2000; Samuelowicz, 1987; Zhai, 2002) viewed English language proficiency as one of the most significant problems. But Kennedy (1995) regarded English proficiency as a necessary but not sufficient condition for international students' academic success. In Li & Kaye's (1998) study, financial problem ranked top while English language problem ranked only fourth after academic progress. In Galloway and Jenkins' (2009) study, financial problem topped the list too. Niven (1987) also argued that loneliness and homesickness were the most common problems facing international students, which was supported by Ying and Liese (1994), for whom level of homesickness was found to be the strongest predictor of poor adjustment.

It can be seen that researchers hold different views about the magnitude of adjustment problems. A possible reason for this discrepancy may be that these studies were conducted in different institutions of different countries, involving students of different years or areas of study. Students' (or staff's) perception of adjustment problems are inevitably influenced by

the specific environment in which they learn or teach; hence students of different institutions may encounter different problems and perceive the magnitude of each problem differently. In a word, this discrepancy reflects the complexity of adjustment issues faced by international students.

CONCLUSION

This review has focused on previous literature on international students' adjustment issues and summarized potential problems facing them as a tentative answer to the review question. The problems are categorized into five groups: personal psychological issues, academic issues, sociocultural issues, general living issues and English language proficiency (see Table 2 for details). Although researchers have not agreed on the magnitude of each problem, there seem to be several salient ones that face most international students: English language proficiency, financial problem, academic progress and homesickness.

This review discusses research carried out in the US, the UK and Australia, and attempts to provide a holistic view of the international students' adjustment issues. However, this choice of review scope precludes an in-depth discussion of problems facing international students in one country. In this sense, the review question has not been fully answered, and much scope is left for future research. The magnitude of adjustment problems needs further exploration. In addition, comparative studies across institutions or even across countries, and longitudinal studies would also be of great benefit.

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