

Chapter 16

Social Contact and Adaptation: A Study of International Students in British Higher Education During the Sojourn and Re-Entry

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ABSTRACT

This longitudinal mixed methods study examined the relationship of social contact and socio-cultural, academic, and psychological adaptation outcomes of international students. The study was conducted over 16 months, spanning over the complete sojourn of the students. Surveys were distributed early and near the end of the academic year (N=84), and semi-structured interviews were conducted once students returned home for at least a month (N=13). Findings suggest there was a significant increase of the quantity and quality of co-national and international contact over the academic year. However, the international students tended to socially segregate from “host national” students (UK students) and had difficulties in maintaining the degree of contact over time. The study also confirms the importance of non-co-national international contact in adaptation during the sojourn and re-adjustment to home cultures.

INTRODUCTION

Due to its burgeoning number, international students¹ in higher education (HE) have started to gain more research attention. In particular, the population of international students worldwide has increased exponentially, from nearly a million in 2002 to over 5.3 million in 2017 (UNESCO, 2021). Currently, the UK is the nation with the third largest population of the students, which is approximately 538,615 in 2019/20 (Universities UK, 2021). It is not uncommon to find a program in UK universities whose majority of students are non-UK (Pho & Schartner, 2021).

Within this group, postgraduate (PG) students, especially the one enrolling for one-year taught programmes, is an important student cohort which has different needs and issues. First, the relatively short duration of PG taught degrees (i.e., one year), compared to other PG programmes in the UK (i.e.,

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PhD), increases the challenges of academic adjustment, with PG taught courses being more intensively delivered and assessed. Second, these students need to adjust socially and culturally to the host culture within a short period of time, which could intensify acculturative stress, making this said group relatively different from other student groups. However, most of the studies in the field of cross-cultural adaptation and intercultural communication are usually conducted by researchers originating from the UK. These studies tend to highlight the importance of the interactions with UK students and the local community, whereas contact with compatriots is often seen as “harmful” to the adjustment process of international students.

Therefore, this chapter focuses specifically on examining the experience of this special group – international students undertaking one-year taught master’s degree in the UK. The chapter offers a new perspective to the view of social contact and its influence on the adaptation of international students. The chapter also aims to provide a better and “fairer” understanding of the students’ social experience. Based on these, recommendations to HE institutions and educators are provided, in hope of contributing to the improvement of the international student’s experience in general and international students in the UK in particular.

BACKGROUND

Three Adaptation Domains and Social Contact

There have been many models of cross-cultural adjustment and adaptation in the cross-cultural transition (CT) and intercultural communication (IC) study (Berry & Annis, 1974; Berry & Sam, 1997; Kim, 2001) and one of the most frequently cited is the work by Ward and Kennedy (1994). They have identified two domains of adaptation and adjustment: psychological (i.e., mental well-being and life satisfaction of a person in the new culture) and sociocultural (i.e., the performance of an individual in the daily social life) (Ward & Kennedy, 1992, 1994). Academic adaptation is later added as the third domain specifically important for international students (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006), associated with adjustment to the academic requirements of the host university, and adaptation outcomes measured by academic achievements and performances (e.g., GPA) (Ryan, 2005). Recently, a number of studies have focused on examining the factors impacting adaptation to the social life and the academic domain of international PG students in the host country (e.g., Wu & Hammond, 2011; Young et al., 2013; Young & Schartner 2014; Busher et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2018; Pho & Schartner, 2019). Some contributory factors which are consistently reported in the literature include English language proficiency, intercultural competence, prior knowledge about the host country, and social support and social contact in the host country (Schartner & Young, 2016). The latter, social contact, is the focus of this study.

Three sources of social contact are reported in the literature of social contact of international students: 1) co-national (i.e., people from the same national background); and 2) host national (i.e., people from the host culture) (Bochner et al., 1977), and non-co-national internationals (i.e., people from different nations) (Young et al., 2013; Schartner, 2015; Pho & Schartner, 2019). Co-nationals are mainly associated with psychological support, host nationals utilitarian benefits and non-co-national internationals academic assistance (Schartner, 2015; Pho & Schartner, 2019; Pho, 2022). Generally, two factors of social contact are examined: quality and quantity. The former is measured by satisfaction of the individual with

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