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Socio-Cultural Adaptation of International Students in Vietnam

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Abstract
The paper is the first to examine international students in Vietnam despite the country's long-existing effort at internationalization. The empirical study is conducted at a large public university in the capital of Vietnam, a popular destination for foreign students. The study explores socio-cultural adaptation of foreign students and finds that lack of support system severely affects their adaptation, especially in academic adaptation. The paper aims to draw attention to the renovation of university system in order to better serve the needs of a diverse student body.

Keywords: Higher Education, Internationalization, Socio-Cultural Adaptation, University Renovation

1. Introduction

In an increasingly interdependent business world, students have to be prepared to work with and next to counterparts from different parts of the world and from different cultures. Not surprisingly, academicians and businesspersons in unison emphasize that universities should nurture global awareness and engagement in our students. The Association of International Educators (NAFSA, 2003) has continually in the last decade said that "Study Abroad must become the norm, not the exception, at higher education institutions (p.3). We need to aggressively promote it to each rising generation". In 2019, there are over six million students moving across their national borders for tertiary education not only in English-speaking countries and Europe but also in the Asia-Pacific region (OECD, 2021).

As part of the internationalization initiatives of the Vietnamese government, attracting international students to come study in Vietnam has increasingly received attention from several key universities and the MOET (Tran et al., 2014). It is considered "as a way for Vietnam to promote Vietnam's education to the world" – as stated by the Vice-Minister of Education and Training at that time, Bui Van Ga (2011, cited in Pham, 2011). However, there is no clear plan on how to attract international students to study in Vietnam; in fact, there is little information about the current administering of international students at Vietnamese universities.

Research on international students in Vietnamese context is mostly about outbound mobility (Vietnamese students studying overseas), literature on foreign students in Vietnamese universities is rare to be found. Some have mentioned the issue of attracting international students to Vietnam, pointing out that inbound student mobility is low in Vietnam as a result of bureaucracy and inflexibility, lack of English-based courses and low reputation (see Pham, 2011; Tran, Marginson & Nguyen, 2014). There is little to none study specifically on experiences of foreign students in Vietnam despite its importance as "Delivering the best possible student experience" is one of the essential ways to strengthen the education export sector (Australian Government, 2016). Therefore, this research intends to explore sociocultural adaptation of international students at Hanoi University, discovering factors that affect their adaptation to Vietnamese settings.

2. Literature Review

On the topic of experiences of international students, challenges in adaptation to the host environment are perhaps the most researched issue. Existing literature concurs that foreign students often struggle to adjust to life in the host country (Oreilly, Ryan, & Hickey, 2010). Adaptation to a new culture can be understood as a "cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members (Berry, 2005, p. 698). Related to this, there is the term "sociocultural adaptation"; which is viewed as a behavior that demonstrates cultural competency, and concerns one's acquisition of cultural and social skills (Berry & Sam, 1997; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Sociocultural adaptation can be defined as behavioral outcomes of individuals in performing daily tasks in foreign environment (Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 1999; Ward & Searle, 1991). Ward and his colleagues have advanced the research on the socio-cultural adaptation of international students with a framework that identifies two interrelated dimensions of the process: the first is sociocultural adaptation as predicted by factors such as social skills, linguistic abilities, and length of stay; the second is psychological adaptation as shaped by factors such as social support, coping style, and personal traits. This theoretical framework, called Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (or SCAS), has been empirically evaluated (Ward and Kennedy, 1999), with regular revisions (Wilson et al., 2017). SCAS is one of the most popular measurements to examine intercultural issues such as cultural competence (Bierwiaczonek & Waldsus, 2016; Wilson et al., 2013) and adaptation (Hippler et al., 2016; Wu and Mak, 2012).

2.1. Hypothesis development

Templeman, Robinson, & McKenna (2016) inspected intercultural experiences of medical students and found out that those with Western backgrounds have better socio-cultural and academic adaptation than those with non-Western backgrounds. Though, differences between those in the same continent seemed to be insignificant. However, the study by Lee & Ciftci (2014) suggested that Asian international students tend to be more open and less prejudiced towards other cultures and thus, may attempt to establish relationships in host countries, which facilitates their adaptation. Due to such conflict in existing literature, this study attempts to test the following:
Hypothesis 1. There is a relationship between nationality and socio-cultural adjustment of international students.

According to Berry (2002), gender is another crucial factor that influences cross-cultural adaptation. Nevertheless, research on gender differences in the adaptation of international students produced mixed results. Ward & Kennedy (1994) and Yeh & Inose (2003) found no gender differences in cross-cultural adaptation of international students, Rhein (2014) found no significant difference in adaptation between men and women students studying in Thailand. Meanwhile, Church (1982) proposed that women tend to have more difficulties in adjusting to host culture and have worse psychological well-being compared to men. The study by Ying & Han (2006) revealed that Taiwanese female students in the United States adapted to the host culture better and endured more psychological comfort than men counterparts. On the same note, Lee, Park and Kim (2009) examined the role of gender in academic adjustment of students and found out that female students had a higher level of adjustment compared to male. Mahmood & Burke (2018) discovered that female students are slightly more competent in adapting to new environments compared to their male counterparts. The discrepancy in current literature prompts this research to test the following:

Hypothesis 2. Female international students have better socio-cultural adjustment compared to male counterparts.

Hwang, Wang, & Sodanine (2011) discovered that international students' adjustment was significantly affected by social support and a supportive campus environment. Social support has been examined in relation to cross-cultural adjustment but most research has been on the role of families and friends instead of the university where international students enroll. Research by Wang & Hannes (2014) at a Belgium university reported that without active organizations and clubs, international students find it difficult to form social networks. On the same note, Lee & Ciftci (2014) proposed that relationship with co-national, host-students and home-country students is a critical factor in the adjustment of international students. Coles and Swami (2012) suggested that universities could facilitate the adjustment of international students by creating opportunities for them to communicate and build relationships through the arrangement of accommodation, work groups in labs and seminars, and social clubs. Nevertheless, language differences may create communication barriers between foreign students and local students and local people. In fact, language capacity is an important factor that affects socio-cultural adaptation (BeBe, 2012; Tsegay, Zegergish & Ashraf, 2018), and Tsegay, Zegergish & Ashraf (2018) suggested that university support by introducing local language at basic level would better facilitate international students' communication in the host environment. Additionally, the study by Pavlushkina et al. (2016) highlighted the importance of pedagogical support in facilitating foreign students' social adaptation in Russian universities. They proposed and experimented a pedagogical model which included three phases from introducing national culture to facilitating intercultural connection, then developing necessary skills for foreign students to adapt to educational requirements. The result showed a significant improvement in social adaptation of international students after the experimented course of action, which implied the important role of university support in the adjustment of foreign students. Gladkova (2017) specifically stressed the important role of academic advisors in providing not only educational assistance but also psychological counseling and helping international students in adjusting to a new life. The hypothesis is proposed as follow:

Hypothesis 3. Socio-cultural adjustment of international students has a positive association with university support.

There has not been any study which inspected the relationship between international students' field of study and their socio-cultural adaptation, though there has been research on the association between field of study and factors of socio-cultural adaptation. Yu & Shen (2012) examined the role of linguistic confidence of students and found out that students in the Faculty of Engineering and Information and in the Faculty of Economics and Business respectively reported the highest and the lowest level of linguistic confidence, proficiency and socio-cultural adaptation among the five faculties sampled.

Hypothesis 4. There is a relationship between socio-cultural adjustment level and the field of study.

It may seem logical that the length of study affects socio-cultural adaptation of international students: the longer the stay, the better adaptation. This was confirmed by Kuo & Roysircar (2004); Wilton and Constantine (2003) who concluded that difficulty in adaptation (measured by stress level) is correlated with duration of stay. However, several other studies showed a different result. For example, Ward and Searle (1991), Zhao (2010) and Wilson (2011) found that duration of stay has no impact on socio-cultural adaptation. The study by Antonakopoulou (2013) on U.S. students of an abroad program also proved no difference in socio-cultural adaptation between short-term (4 weeks) groups of students and long-term (three semesters) groups. Research by Güzel, H., & Glazer, S. (2019) inspected socio-cultural adaptation difficulty and claimed no significant correlation between length of stay and socio-cultural adaptation. Due to such inconsistencies in existing literature, this study proposes that:

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The population in this study was undergraduate international students at Hanoi University. The university is one of the most prestigious public universities in Northern region, with a long-standing reputation for its linguistic

programs. Therefore, the university is among very few to host a large number of foreign student body. The target subjects include short-term exchange students who study for one or two semesters, and regular standard ones who spend the whole 3 years or more studying in Vietnam. According to the International Collaboration Office of Hanoi, University, there are only very few faculties hosting international students, including Faculty of Vietnamese studies, Faculty of Management and Tourism, and Faculty of International Studies. Therefore, the survey was distributed online to the students in these faculties.

3.2. Instrumentation

Data was collected by using a questionnaire. The questionnaire was adapted from the Sociocultural Adaptation Scale by Ward & Kennedy (1999). The final version of the framework had 40 items on 5-point Likert-type scale. The framework included 40 items grouped into four sections: Basic needs and Transportation & Adapting to living environment, Social life, Impersonal Endeavors and Perils, and Adapting to College life.

Section I - Basic needs and Transportation & Adapting to living environment
The 11 items in this section describes experiences in dealing with daily life and ability to take care of essential needs such as food, clothing and transportation systems. Students who score high in this section perceive themselves as having difficulty adapting to the new living environment and in performing tasks in the new environment.

Section II - Social life
Items in this dimension measure the ability to understand and communicate well with others. Students who score high in this dimension see themselves as having difficulty in fitting socially in the new environment

Section III - Impersonal Endeavors and Perils
This section "concerns the management of impersonal interactions (e.g., bureaucracy, authority) and/or awkward situations (e.g., unsatisfactory services)" (Ward & Kennedy, p. 670). Students who score high on this section perceive themselves as having difficulty in dealing with external factors outside of their control.

Section IV - Adapting to College life
This dimension describes experiences in dealing with everyday life at the university. Students who score high on this dimension see themselves as having difficulty in adapting to the university.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1. Descriptive analysis

A total of 147 responses were collected, all were enrolled at Hanoi University in the last 5 years. The number of male and female students are quite balanced. The majority of respondents are foreign students in Vietnamese Studies, and the rest are from Management Faculty and International Studies. Nearly 80% of survey participants are from Asia, and only 20% are from other continents. Over half of total participants reported that they studied either Vietnamese culture or Hanoi University before coming to Vietnam. Most students reported that they perceived Faculty support in terms of cultural introduction when they first came to the country. Details of population's demographic and preliminary information are provided in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics

Characteristics	n	%
Gender		
Male	78	53.1
Female	69	46.9
Nationality		
Africa, America, Europe	30	20.4

Asia	117	79.6
Major		
Management, International Studies	21	14.3
Vietnamese linguistics	126	85.7
Self-preparation		
No	55	37.4
Yes	92	62.6
Faculty support		
No	33	22.4
Yes	114	77.6
Overall	147	100.0

Regarding difficulties in adapting to the living environment, understanding the local accent is considered as the most challenging task (with 26% respondents rating this as highly difficult) while going shopping is the easiest as over 50% of foreign students viewed it as extremely easy or easy.

In terms of social life, most students find it hard to express themselves (25%). Interestingly, they seem to have the least trouble when making friends.

In respect to impersonal endeavours, most students find it the most difficult when dealing with bureaucracy (38%). Dealing with someone unpleasant/aggressive, and taking a local perspective (both accounting for 36%) were also rated as difficult. Meanwhile, most students reportedly have little to none difficulty in understanding cultural differences (35% rated this as extremely easy).

Lastly, in adaptation to college life, generally international students find it easy to communicate to university staff. Not surprisingly, the most burdensome tasks rated by students include expressing their ideas in class (18%) and coping with academic work (14%).

4.2. Regression analysis

At the confidence level of 95%, results of regression analysis (Table 2) prove a relationship between socio-cultural adaptation and students' nationality (with sig.=0.036 < 0.05), major (sig. = 0.002 < 0.05), and duration of stay (sig. = 0.001<0.05); therefore, we accept Hypothesis 1, 4, and 5. Other variables: gender and university support does not have any relationship with socio-cultural adaptation.

Table 2: Socio-cultural adaptation and variables

Coefficients[a]

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients			95.0% Confidence Interval for B	
Model		B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.	Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1	(Constant)	1.766	.284		6.217	.000	1.204	2.328
	ETH	.254	.120	.174	2.117	.036	.017	.491
	MJR	.432	.135	.264	3.200	.002	.165	.698
	DUR	-.008	.002	-.266	-3.367	.001	-.013	-.003

a. Dependent Variable: OverallAdaptation

Hypothesis 1 proposes that nationality affects sociocultural adaptation, and results show that international students from Asia show a better level of adaptation (M=2.88) compared to those from European, American, and African continents (M=2.56). To be more specific, the impact of nationality on adaptation is demonstrated most

strongly in terms of Impersonal Endeavours and Perils (sig.=0.002<0.05) (Table 3); Asian students seem to deal with unfavorable situations much better (M=3.05) than students from the other continents (M=2.60).

Hypothesis 4 proposes that students' field of study has a relationship with sociocultural adaptation. Students are from grouped into two majors: Vietnamese studies and others (including International Studies, Management and Tourism). ANOVA test was run for analysis and results in Table 4 shows differences in students' ability to adapt. Specifically, the relationship between major and adaptation is demonstrated in aspects of Impersonal Endeavours and Social Life (sig.<0.05); Vietnamese linguistics students can adapt much better in social situations (M=2.92) and in impersonal situations (M=3.05) compared to those of other majors (M=2.52 and M=2.37 respectively).

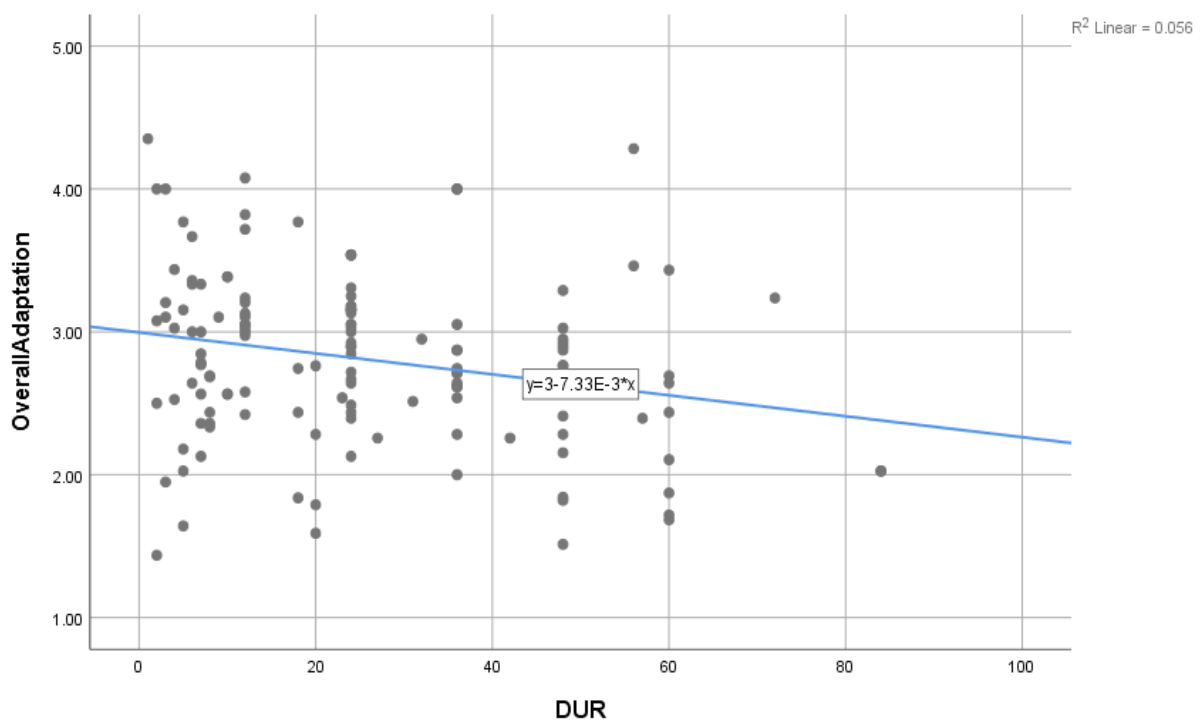Table 3: Socio-cultural adaptation differences by major

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
SocialLife	Between Groups	2.916	1	2.916	6.077	.015
	Within Groups	69.570	145	.480		
	Total	72.485	146			
Endeavours	Between Groups	8.300	1	8.300	17.886	.000
	Within Groups	66.821	144	.464		
	Total	75.121	145			

Hypothesis 5 proposes that students' duration of stay affects their sociocultural adaptation, and statistics in Table confirm this relationship with sig. = 0.005.

Further inspection shows a peculiar trend: the longer the stay is, the lower socio-cultural adaptation is (Graph 1).

Graph 1: Scatter plot of socio-cultural adaptation and duration of stay

5. Discussion

Enrolment of international students would continue to be important in the internationalization process of Vietnamese higher education. This trend is even more relevant in the context of rising global connectedness, and increasing pressure on Vietnamese universities to take control of student enrolment and financial matters as a part of the governmental initiative to reduce state control over higher education. However, low credibility, limited number of courses in English, and lack of marketing plan to attract foreign students make HEIs in Vietnam remain a non-popular destination. The majority of foreign students at Vietnamese universities enroll in courses on Vietnamese studies such Vietnamese language or literature; very few select other disciplines such as sciences or economics (Pham, 2011). This is reflected in this study where the majority of respondents are from the Faculty of Vietnamese studies, and a marginalized number are in Business or International Studies major.

This study is the first to examine the experiences of international students in Vietnam. The results showed that international students have moderate level of social adaptation when studying in Vietnam. Of the four dimensions: Living Environment, Social Life, Endeavours, College Life, adaptation to college life is the worst while surprisingly, dealing with impersonal perils and endeavours has the highest score. This result is similar with existing literature. Difficulties in adaptation to college life have been discussed as one of the main challenges for international students. Several studies (Xiong and Zhou, 2018; Girmay, 2017) showed that adjustment to academic environment is one of the main themes summarizing challenges for international students. International students have to adjust to the differences in academic systems, norms and expectations regarding teaching styles, evaluation methods, and class activities.

This demonstrates that universities need to have academic consultants for international students to help them get adapt to the learning environment in the foreign country. However, currently, there are no academic advisors for international students at Vietnamese universities; most just have a unit that supports international students in general matters and mainly provide paperwork or administration assistance. There is absolutely no consultancy regarding cultural differences in academic life such as communicating with classmates, or doing teamwork. And emotional support or stress-handling assistance caused by living in new environment is not offered.

This suggestion does not contradict but further explains one finding in this paper that said university support is not related to socio-cultural adaptation of students. The type of university support currently provided is insufficient and ineffective to the point that it has no impact on students' adaptation. Noteworthily, that is also why the adaptation of international students has a peculiar trend of worsening the longer they stay. Without proper consultation and emotional support along the way, alienated feeling replaces the excitement students feel in the beginning when they first arrive in the country.

It is not surprising when foreign students of Vietnamese linguistic majors have better cultural adaptation compared to those of other majors. Linguistic courses include subjects and activities that help students to understand the host culture better, which in turn improves their understanding and adjustment to the host environment. Additionally, language classes are often arranged in ways that allow students to be in the same class during the whole program, which strengthens their camaraderie and provides emotional support while students are far from home. On the contrary, students of other majors select their courses based on their preferences, which means their classmates change course after course and there are more difficulties for them as they have to adapt to new classes every semester. As a result, socio-cultural adaptation of linguistic student is especially better in social and impersonal situations, but not in academic aspect. This further underlines the importance of establishing academic support for international students rather than leaving them to their own resources. Professional and standard support from the school cannot be replaced with personal resources such as friendship and companionship.

6. Conclusion

To advance the education system in Vietnam, the government aims to internationalize universities by attracting international students. Besides, the number of foreigners arriving in Vietnam to work and live with their family have increased, which means a huge potential for Vietnamese schools to target new audience of students. Even

though there are more and more English-taught programs opened, improvement is still needed to help foreign students to adapt to academic life. This paper is the first one to examine the adaptation of international students in Vietnam. Findings of the paper show that international students from Asian continent and studying Vietnamese language have better socio-cultural adaptation than those from other continents and studying other majors. However, this better adjustment is only in terms of social situations and not college life. An odd trend of worsening adaptation despite longer stays demonstrate that lack of proper support may lead to poor adaptation over time. Therefore, this paper stresses the necessity of establishing school support for international students in terms of both academic and cultural aspects.

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