

The Procedure of an International Student Studying Abroad: A Case Study

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Abstract: As it is examined and concluded by many researchers, studying abroad has been common when students are trying to receive higher quality education. Cross-cultural adjustment is also regarded as a compulsory term to consider, and the way to get involved in the host culture has also been deeply investigated in this procedure. Therefore, this paper aims at identifying the factors that cause cultural barriers, as well as finding solutions to cope with them. In this study, a case study research method is employed and the result will be beneficial to support future research in similar fields.

Keywords: International students; Cross-cultural transition; Studying abroad

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1. Introduction

It is an intercultural educational phenomenon that students move around the world to pursue higher education. According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, there is a large number of international students, maybe over four million self-supported international students, who are studying outside their original countries and the number of these individuals is growing ^[1]. European Youth Portal (EYP) has stated through its official website that the experience of studying abroad can not only improve competence in language learning but also enhance self-awareness, intercultural skills, and self-reliance. There is also an increasing number of academic literature that appears to investigate the benefits of academic sojourns, due to the fact that the number of international students is still increasing ^[2].

Additionally, Hoffa also indicated that the experience of studying abroad had been exaggerated and it was believed to be a sought-after tool to develop intercultural competencies ^[3]. The linguistic intercultural terms have claimed the revolutionary potential of studying abroad ^[4]. As it was indicated by Salisbury, studying abroad is stimulated by the belief that intercultural competence can be strengthened by international studying experience ^[5].

Case study as a branch of qualitative research, can contribute to analyzing exhaustive interpretation of one's personal perspectives and experiences ^[6]. Therefore, this study aims to explore the social adjustment and cross-cultural development of international students by deeply analyzing the data collected from two

participants.

2. Literature review

A lot of research has focused on the academic achievement of students who are studying abroad, especially in the area of higher education. However, few of them have focused on their intercultural competencies and how they develop their social adjustment. It can be a challenge for international students to develop a social network with a fresh cultural background, like getting involved in a social circle with an interracial group of students. There are also previous studies that suggested that international students may experience alienation, marginalization, loneliness, helplessness, or even social loss during the period of studying abroad ^[7].

Gudykunst revealed that interpersonal communication is an important step for those students studying outside their home country to adjust to the local social and cultural environment ^[8]. Nizami showed that companionship, social support, and friendship can increase satisfaction and even promote mental and physical health ^[9]. Strong and weak social ties were also identified by Hendrickson *et al.* to distinguish how they influence the acculturation of international students ^[10]. Friendship presents with self-esteem, adjustment, and goal stability ^[9]. It is also suggested by Kim *et al.* that social circles can provide emotional and informational assistance ^[11]. To support international students positively, it is wise for people who work with international students to explore social barriers, social support, and even social network experiences.

3. Research objectives and questions

According to former research, many international students had difficulties and stress during the social transition outside their home countries. Most international students expect to socialize with local people because they have also realized the benefits and importance of socializing with people from different cultural backgrounds. This paper will focus on investigating the condition of international students' cross-cultural transition by analyzing two international students' social experiences.

Three main questions are posed to locate the areas that need to be explored:

- (1) How does social adjustment happen when international students are experiencing cross-cultural transition?
- (2) What is the relationship between physical activities and social transition?
- (3) Are there any other effective approaches that can help international students fulfill social adjustment?

4. Research design and methodology

Studies on international students' social experiences have employed typically quantitative research methods ^[12]. However, a qualitative method can provide a chance to make a deeper investigation into the "lived" experience of certain students ^[13]. Therefore, a case study that will involve two participants was employed to investigate how social interaction and physical activities influence international students in this study.

4.1. Design and participants

A lot of specific questions are required to collect the data and multiple sources of qualitative data are complex. This study tracked the process of their experiences to engage in social activities and cross-cultural transformation. Both participant observations and interviews were used in this research.

A purposive sampling method was employed, selecting a couple of first-year international students, Wei

and Clara, who were both majoring in Business and Management at a British university ^[14]. They were in the first stage of the cultural transition and were invited to participate in the research. They came from two different areas in China and became friends, classmates, and roommates in the UK. In addition to solely studying in the same university, both of them had joined the Students and Scholars Association in the first semester of university.

4.2. Data collection

Data collection is significant for developing theories ^[15]. Interview as one of the eight main methods of collecting data, was defined as “a flexible tool for data collection” ^[14]. Therefore, two face-to-face interviews were conducted with the guidance of the case study structure format, and the interviews were recorded for further analysis.

As concluded by Marshall and Rossman, observation, as a data collection method, not only involves looking at something but also systematically noting behaviors, settings, and individuals ^[16]. Therefore, observation notes were gathered during this process and used as part of the data to support the research.

5. Data analysis and evaluation

5.1. Interviewing data

Wei is 18 years old. She comes from a family that is keen on physical activities. During her stay in the UK, she enjoys doing exercises in the park near their home. She also has a dog, Max, who is surprisingly active and must go out every day. During that period, she has met several local dog owners of different age groups and they regularly share the routine of dogs with each other. Therefore, she has enough chances to get involved in local social groups, which she enjoys.

Clara is a 19-year-old girl. There is not much history of physical activities in her family, but she is always active at parties and social events. She is obsessed with singing and dancing. Just one year before she studied in the UK, she had even outstandingly performed in a professional singing talent show in China. She can also be the leader or even advisor in some activities in the Chinese Students and Scholars Association, which brought her more opportunities to meet other Chinese students, as well as students from different cultural backgrounds who also enjoy taking part in social activities within their university.

However, not every Chinese student could gain the same opportunity to socialize with multicultural friends during their sojourns in the UK. Most of their Chinese schoolmates and classmates only communicate with Chinese friends and classmates. A lot of academic literature also cautioned that intercultural competence may not be that easy to acquire during the international studying period ^[17].

5.2. Observation data

In addition, Wei and Clara are close friends as well. They met each other in the six-week pro-session English courses before their main courses and they are also classmates now in the main courses. They both had social circles of their own and they could also share their social circles and join the same activities sometimes.

Through observation of their social activities during the research, it was found they had truly benefited a lot from their interaction with each other and with other conational friends. It is suggested by Klomegah that international students can get satisfaction if they contact conational friends frequently ^[18]. Brown also found that international students can get a sense of belonging from conational socialization, which could make up for their homesickness. However, Hendrickson *et al.* indicated that it can also be impeditive for international students to require intercultural communication if they socialize with conational friends only. Both of the participants

enjoyed occasionally joining local clubs and parties. It is concluded that although there was a certain degree of language and cultural barrier, British native students and other international students from Italy, Romania, and Ireland would also be curious about their life in China. They were also interested in getting some recommendations about Chinese traveling tips from Wei and Clara. This brought them more confidence and a sense of fulfillment, proving that multicultural relations, like international relationships between international students, can offer international companions and recreational relationships ^[19].

6. Conclusion and limitations

Cross-cultural adjustment was regarded as a lifelong activity in the way of fitting the host culture as it was referred to by Kim ^[20]. Some limitations existed, for example, the adjustment happened at the initial stage of their first year. Another limitation is that only two female participants and no male participants were referred to in this research. Cross-cultural adjustment has a quite broad definition, which should not be limited to female international students in their first year as sojourners. The term of the study is inadequate to track their social adjustment. Therefore, future studies are needed to explore the development of international students' cross-cultural transition. The result can provide advice to university staff who always work with international students. Activities that include both international students and local students can be colorful. It can also be a good opportunity for international students to interact in the current social environment and for local students to develop their own culture during social interaction.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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