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International Student Acculturation: How East-Asian Students Adapt To Life In The UK

Abstract:

When individuals move to an unfamiliar culture, they are faced with complex decisions regarding maintenance of their original culture and adaptation to the behaviours of the host culture, resulting in four potential adaptation styles (assimilation, integration, separation and marginalisation). This process is known as acculturation and is particularly relevant to international students, who face a combination of academic and cultural challenges during their sojourn. Students who integrate with the host culture have a more enriching student experience and report higher levels of satisfaction with their university.

An acculturation scale was utilised from the literature to investigate the most common acculturation styles used by East Asian students in a UK university. A total of 125 respondents completed the 29-item scale online and also submitted demographic information, with internal reliability assessed using Cronbach's Alpha.

The results show that 46% of respondents have adopted an 'integration' approach, showing a willingness to adapt to UK life whilst also retaining elements of their original culture. These results are encouraging for university staff responsible for the well-being of international students. However, the proportion of international students who separate themselves from the host culture (37%) clearly suggests that more can be done to support their cultural adaptation.

Key Words: International Students, Acculturation

Track Indication: Marketing of Higher Education

1. Introduction and Literature Review

Acculturation is a concept with roots in the fields of anthropology and psychology, however almost ninety years of academic research has failed to identify an agreed definition of the concept. Essentially, Steenkamp (2002) feels the concept is concerned with how individuals react to the national culture of other countries. A concise definition has been proposed by Seitz (1998), viewing acculturation as “the process of acquiring the customs of an alternative society” (p. 23).

Although use of the term acculturation has been traced back to the 1880’s, it was not considered a serious political issue until the early 1900’s, when the US Immigration Commission was established to monitor the cultural impact immigrants were having on the nation (Ogden, Schau and Ogden, 2004). Research in this field has grown considerably over the last 20 years, largely due to the growth of multi-cultural populations, caused by changing migration patterns and trans-national communication media (Luna and Gupta, 2001).

Initially, theoretical thinking on acculturation was based on a uni-dimensional or ‘assimilation’ perspective, whereby acquiring the characteristics of the dominant culture required the relinquishing of another (O’Guinn, Wei-Na and Faber, 1986). Also known as the ‘melting pot’ model, this approach was adopted by the US Government in the 1930’s as they attempted to limit the impact immigrants would have on the nations’ cultural heritage (Ogden, Schau and Ogden, 2004). This model remained largely unchallenged until the 1960’s, when nations gradually started to actively promote diversity and social scientists began referring to the concept of bi-culturalism (Alvarez and Alvarez, 2004). The assumption that individuals simply move along a continuum with the inevitable outcome of ‘assimilation’ came under increased scrutiny from academics. As Maldonado and Tansuhaj stated: “Acculturation recognises that one may not necessarily become more like the new culture” (2002, p. 414).

In response to growing criticism of the uni-dimensional approach, Canadian psychologist John Berry (1980) devised a bi-dimensional framework which has provided the platform for the majority of modern acculturation research. It was based on the notion that involvement in one culture is not dependent on involvement in another, and resulted in four potential acculturation styles available to immigrants: “Rather than assimilation, a vast typology is opened up which recognizes the cultural interests of all groups as well as the political realities in which the adaptation occurs” (Berry, 1980, p. 16-17).

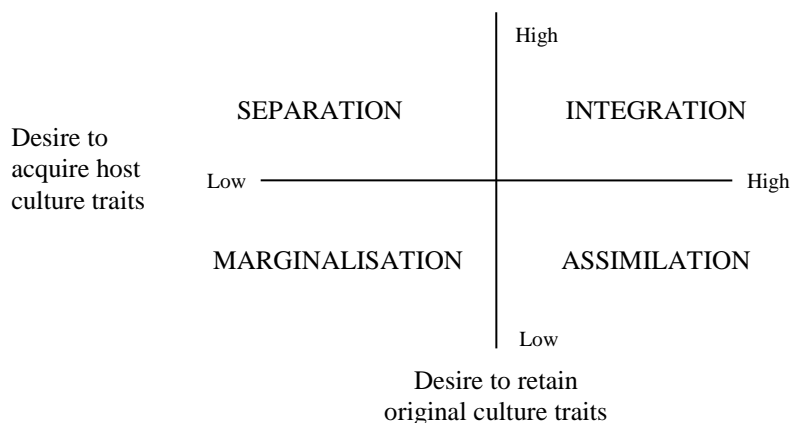


Figure 1: Berry’s Bi-Dimensional Acculturation Styles (Berry, 1980, p. 14).

Despite receiving criticism for assuming immigrant choice in acculturation style, when in reality it may be imposed upon them by Government (Burton, 1996), the matrix has had “enormous influence on theory and research” in North America and Europe (Novas et al, 2005, p.22). As the bi-dimensional model is deemed particularly appropriate for bi-cultural societies and communities (Szapocnik and Kurtines, 1980) this framework is to be utilised in the present study.

2. Student Acculturation

The majority of acculturation research has focused on permanent groups of immigrants (e.g. Hispanics into the US). Perhaps surprisingly, despite the growth in the international student market over recent years, little research has addressed the acculturation of those moving between cultures for educational purposes:

“When people move from their home-culture to another host-culture for career advancement, educational or personal reasons, alterations of lifestyle frequently occur”
(Data-on, 2000, p. 428)

Indeed, an earlier study Sodowsky and Plake (1992) had argued that research was required into student acculturation because of the financial, academic and cultural contribution international students make to university life. As Feldham and Rosenthal (1990) have suggested, younger immigrants or sojourners are often torn between their original culture (which is strongly represented by old family members) and the host culture, which is visible to them through new peer groups and everyday life. Such conflict can prove stressful for an international student who is keen to maintain relationships with those back home whilst simultaneously integrating with the host society. According to Bourhis et al (1997), adapting to an unfamiliar culture and education system is complicated further when there are a wide variety of ethnic groups on one campus.

In addition to the organisational problems of enrolment and maintaining friendships with those back home, international students may also face additional difficulties including prejudice and discrimination (Lay and Safdar, 2003), language difficulties (Kogan and Cohen, 1990) homesickness (Leung, 2001) or an inability to adapt to more ‘critical’ approaches to teaching and learning (Butcher and McGrath, 2004).

A key issue in the acculturation of international students is their friendship networks. Koshima and Loh (2006) distinguished between mono-cultural networks (co-nationals), bi-cultural networks (including local students and staff) and multi-cultural networks (a blend of various cultures). They concluded that relationships with local students are highly valued by international students, but such relationships can be difficult to form. In an earlier study, Bochner, McLeod and Lin (1977) found that international students spent more time with co-nationals and were more likely to class them as their closest friends, something which may impede their overall integration into university life.

Zheng, Sang and Weng (2004) utilised Berry’s (1980) bi-dimensional framework to investigate which acculturation styles were most commonly adopted by Chinese students in Australia. Their results indicated that only around 31% of students were integrated with a similar proportion of respondents becoming marginalised. The same study also concluded that integrated students have higher levels of student well-being than their assimilated, separated and marginalised counterparts: indeed, integrated students have a more fulfilling

and enriching study abroad experience (Butcher and McGrath, 2004). This suggests that universities should seek to ensure that international students retain links with their original culture whilst simultaneously interacting with others.

This study is designed to identify the most common acculturation styles adopted by East Asian students at a North-Eastern university utilising Berry's (1980) taxonomy. A knowledge of preferred acculturation styles may be useful to those university staff involved in induction processes or more general pastoral care for international students. The acculturation process may have consequences on international student retention, satisfaction levels and even academic achievement.

3. Methodology

The selected respondents for this study were drawn from the International student population at a North-East university for the 2006/07 academic year. Specifically, the research focuses on students of East Asian origin (including Mainland China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam) as they represent the largest body of international students in the university, and it has been claimed that the growth in the international education market over the next two decades will be dominated by Asia (Arambewela, Hall and Zuhair, 2005). In total, there are estimated to be 2,000 East Asian students at the university.

During the process of selecting a suitable acculturation scale from the literature, many scales were deemed inappropriate because of their reliance on the somewhat dated uni-dimensional view of acculturation. The decision was made to utilise the East Asian Acculturation Measure (EAAM), developed by Declan Barry in 2001. The scale is a 29-item, quasi-dimensional tool – here it differs from other bi-dimensional scales as it contains 4 sub-scales, each focusing on the four styles of acculturation proposed by Berry (1980 – Figure 1). The items were generated through in-depth interviews with East Asian students and validated through a survey of a further 150 students. The scale was deemed especially appropriate due to its emphasis on language and social relationships, which the literature suggests are the two key acculturation issues for international students.

Students were contacted via the university email system and invited to part in the survey via a separate website. Participants were also required to supply various demographic data that has been linked to acculturation in previous studies (e.g. gender, age and length of time in the UK).

4. Data Analysis

A total of 125 South-East Asian students fully completed the EAAM and demographic information, resulting in a usable response rate of just over 5%. This is somewhat disappointing considering the efforts made to encourage higher levels of participation, including making the survey available in a choice of two languages (English and Simplified Chinese).

Given the potential importance of age as a determinant of both acculturation styles it was particularly pleasing to note a spread of age groups responding to the survey: 47 (38%) of respondents were aged 24 or over, with the modal age group being 22-23. There was also a reasonable spread of responses on length of the residence, with 49 (39%) reporting residing in the UK for over 1 year, and 15 (12%) reporting over 3 years. This spread of response may

reflect the differing year groups participating in the study. There was a near perfect split in terms of language chosen to complete the survey – 63 completed in Simplified Chinese as opposed to 62 completing in English, justifying the decision to offer the survey in a choice of languages. Unsurprisingly given the composition of the student base at the university, 62 (49%) of respondents hail from Mainland China, with the majority of other students coming from Malaysia (22, 17%), Taiwan (18, 14%) and Hong Kong (15, 12%). Respondents were also asked to specify the faculty in which they were enrolled to study: With the exception of the Business School which contributed over half of all respondents (70, 56%), there was a reasonable dispersion of students across the remaining faculties.

Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach’s Alpha: The overall alpha for the EAAM was 0.73, an acceptable level of reliability for psychometric instruments (Nunally, 1967) and also almost identical to the alpha score gained when the scale was originally developed and tested by Barry (2001). Construct validity was investigated by examining correlations between the four sub-scales and seeing if the results align with conceptual thinking on acculturation (Figure 1). Weak negative correlations were found to exist between (1) assimilation and separation, and (2) integration and marginalisation. In addition, significant positive relationships are evident between integration and assimilation (.382) and marginalisation and separation (.217), mirroring the results presented when the scale was originally developed in 2001.

Figure 2 summarises the average scores for each acculturation style across all respondents, and also highlights how many adopt each style. Almost half of the respondents (46%) scored highest on the integration sub-scale, with a further 45 (37%) reporting highest scores on the separation sub-scale. The remaining acculturation styles (assimilation and marginalisation) were far less prevalent amongst the respondents, with 8% and 9% reporting these styles respectively. This divide is evident via the mean scores displayed in the second column: whereas integration and separation averages are around the 4.00 mark (possible scores of 1.00 to 7.00), assimilation and marginalisation are closer to 3.00.

Acculturation Style	Mean Score (/7)	Standard Deviation	No. reported as preferred style	Percentage (%)
Assimilation	3.23	0.26	10	8
Separation	3.91	0.99	45	37
Integration	4.18	0.57	59	46
Marginalisation	3.09	0.36	11	9
Total			125	100

Figure 2: Preferred Acculturation Styles

A full breakdown of results for individual items can be found in Appendix A. Overall, the item scoring the highest level of agreement was from the separation sub-scale: “My closest friends are Asian” which scored an average of 5.85. This was significantly higher than the next highest scoring item which scored 4.69 (from the integration sub-scale: “I have both English and Asian friends”). The lowest scoring items unsurprisingly both came from the marginalisation sub-scale: “Sometimes I feel that Asians and English people do not accept me” scored 2.63, whilst “I find that I do not feel comfortable when I am with other people” scored slightly higher at 2.66.

Spearman's Rank Order correlation was used to test for associations between acculturation scores and both length of stay and age. The results suggest that there is very little association between either age or length of stay and the four acculturation styles. The only correlations of note are weak and negative in nature: age and assimilation (-.201) and age and integration (.200), suggesting that as people get older they are less likely to adopt either of these acculturation styles. Similarly, no significant correlations were noted between length of stay and acculturation. The most likely explanation for these results is the homogenous nature of the population from which the respondents were drawn. Only 4 of the 125 respondents had been in the UK for 5 or more years, and 118 (94%) of respondents were aged 20-30. It may be expected that had the instrument been administered in a less homogenous population that the apparent influence of length of stay would be higher.

Independent Samples t-tests concluded that those completing the survey in English were likely to score higher on the assimilation and integration sub-scales, which supports previous work highlighting the importance of language usage and ability in the acculturation process. The only notable differences uncovered on gender concerned the separation sub-scale; males were more likely to adopt this acculturation style than females (mean scores of 4.1 and 3.7 respectively). A comparison of students across faculties was only of limited value owing to the sometimes small numbers of participants from certain courses. Interestingly, Law students were found to score highest on the assimilation sub-scale, possibly indicating that their study of the British legal system has led to them adapting further behaviours associated with UK culture.

5. Discussion

The number of international students adopting an integration acculturation style is positive news for university staff responsible for their wellbeing, as it shows a desire to maintain previous cultural heritage but also become involved with the local community. However the research does not address whether or not this integration process has been successful for students, and this represents a potential angle for future research: Alvarez and Alvarez (2004) have suggested that failed integration (perhaps due to racial prejudice) can result in individuals becoming marginalised from society.

These above results seem to fit with previous work done on international student interaction: Round (2005) has highlighted that students tend not to integrate hugely with other international student groups. University managers may be encouraged by the fact that the marginalisation items received the lowest levels of agreement – it would be logical to presume that those feeling marginalised from the university would be the ones most likely to consider withdrawing from the university. In addition, the small number of students adopting an assimilation approach provides further evidence that the traditional uni-dimensional view of acculturation is now out-dated (Lee and Um, 1992).

Universities with a diverse cultural population should seek to understand the acculturation processes of their international students. In particular, the early stages of cultural adaptation are crucial and can be decisive in whether the student thrives both socially and academically or ultimately withdraws from the university. With UK universities under increasing competition from Australian and other English-speaking universities across the world (Arambewela, Hall and Zuhair, 2005), showing a genuine interest in their students' overall adaptation may be a means of gaining maximising retention and generating future positive word of mouth.

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Appendix A: EAAM Sub-Scale Scores by Item

Sub-Scale	Item No.	Item Description	Average Score
Assimilation	1	Write better in English than native language	3.39
	5	Speak English at home	3.06
	9	Prefer to write poetry in English	3.54
	13	Get along better with English people	3.12
	17	English people understand me better	2.85
	21	Easier to communicate with English people	3.14
	24	More comfortable socialising with English	3.54
	27	Most friends at university are English	3.12
Separation	2	Listen to Asian music	3.93
	6	Closest friends are Asian	5.85
	10	Prefer Asian social gatherings	3.40
	14	Asians treat me as equal	3.85
	18	Prefer date with an Asian	3.49
	22	More relaxed around Asians	4.21
	25	Asians should date other Asians	2.66
Integration	3	Tell jokes in both languages	3.62
	7	Think in both languages	3.49
	11	Both English and Asian friends	4.69
	15	Feel valued by English and Asians	4.38
	19	Comfortable around English and Asians	4.62
Marginalisation	4	Difficult to socialise with anybody	2.94
	8	Neither English people or Asians like me	2.87
	12	No-one understands me	3.70
	16	Hard to communicate with people	3.48
	20	Hard to make friends	3.11
	23	Not accepted by English people or Asians	2.63
	26	Hard to trust English people or Asians	3.12
	28	Both English people and Asians don't understand me	3.25
29	Not comfortable with other people	2.66	