

Effects of Cultural Adjustment on Academic Achievement of International Students

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Abstract

This study was an attempt to find out how cultural adjustment can affect academic achievement of international students. The sample consisted of 106 international students studying in two public universities in Islamabad. Cultural Adjustment Scale (CAS) was used to measure the adjustment level of students. The academic achievement of international students was taken in terms of Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) after completing first semester in university. Correlation analysis revealed significant correlation between cultural adjustment and academic achievement. A significant difference was found in the academic performance of the students between high and low level of cultural adjustment; and cultural adjustment was found to be a significant predictor of academic achievement of international students.

Key Words: Cultural Adjustment, International Students, Academic Achievement

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Introduction

The emerging trend of international exchange of students and scholars has drawn the attention of educationists toward the adjustment problems of foreign students. Paige (1990) defines international students as individuals who are temporary residents of a country, other than their own, for educational purposes and they are culturally distinguishable from their hosts. As international students are culturally different from their hosts, they have their own social norms, values and conduct. When these students try to adjust in new social environment, these differences may cause some problems. The emotional response of international students to these difficulties and adaptation to cultural changes is called cultural adjustment.

Gabel, Dolen and Cerdin (2005) defined cultural adjustment as the changes that individuals undergo to form a relationship with the host society. According to Constantine, Okazaki and Utsey (2004), cultural adjustment involves the process of understanding and incorporating behaviours, values and beliefs of the host culture in the perspective of the one's own culture of origin. Kagan and Cohen, (1990) have defined cultural adjustment in terms of a process that involves several interrelated factors associated with behavioural, cognitive, affective and demographic aspects and that results in different levels of adjustment from cultural assimilation to cultural transmutation.

On entering a new country, the international students have to deal with several adjustment problems in a new social and academic environment. These problems may include difficulty in language and communication, accommodation and housing concerns, adjustment to different foods and tastes, changed climate, and difficulty in making social relations. The academic performance of international students may be affected by their ability to cope with these problems. It may be reasonable to assume that the students having better ability of adjustment can show better academic performance than those students who are less adaptable. Therefore, we can say that cultural adjustment plays an important role in successful completion of the study program of international students (Nasir, 2011).

Many research studies have been conducted to examine the problems that international students face throughout the process of cultural adjustment during their stay in a foreign country (Gong, 2003; Swagler & Ellis, 2003; Mehdizadeh and Scott, 2005; Blake, 2006; Wester, Kuo and Vogel 2006; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). After analyzing the research work on adjustment issues, Black, Mendenhall and Oddou (1991) asserted that cross-cultural adjustment should be considered a multifaceted construct rather than a unitary construct. They have mentioned its three facets:

adjustment to work, adjustment to interacting with host nationals, and adjustment to the general environment.

In their study of cultural adjustment of international managers, Gabel, Dolan and Cerdin (2005) defined these three dimensions of cultural adjustment as follows: *Social-cultural adjustment* refers to healthy interpersonal relationships with members of the host society; *Work adjustment* means to relate with the culture of workplace (educational institution in case of students), and work requirements; *General adjustment* involves adjustment to daily living issues such as food, language, satisfaction with life, etc. Selmer (1999) used the same model for studying adjustment pattern of western expatriate business managers in China.

Research has supported the idea that cultural and social adjustment can affect success in various fields of life including education. In a longitudinal study Chen, Robin and Li (1997) found that social adjustment of adolescent students contributes to their academic achievement. Gabel, Dolen and Cerdin (2005) found that the ability to adjust to new cultural and social environment can predict success in international assignments of global manager. On the basis of review of research literature Furnham (2004) concluded that foreign students face more physical, mental and academic problems than do native students.

There is little research in Pakistan regarding problems of international students. However, the major problems of students are same as in the other countries. Shariff (2004) interviewed some international students and found their major problem was communication with the host community. Another problem is adjustment to the local food. The severe weather conditions also cause adjustment problems for international students. Nasir (2011) found that cultural adjustment of international students affects their academic achievement.

As international students make an important part of the institution, there is a need to understand the factors that can contribute to their academic success. The institutions of higher education should be aware of the problems faced by international students in order to help them complete their educational program. Therefore, this study was designed to explore the relationship between the cultural adjustment and academic performance of international students. It was hypothesized that cultural adjustment has a significant correlation with academic success of international students. The study aimed to explore:

- a. the relationship between cultural adjustment and academic achievement of foreign students;

- b. the predictive value of cultural adjustment for academic achievement of foreign students; and
- c. the difference between cultural adjustment of male and female students.

Methodology

The participants of the study were 106 randomly selected international students studying in two public universities in Islamabad including International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) and National University of Modern Languages (NUML). These two universities cater a significant number of international students. The sample consisted of 48 male students and 58 female students with age range 19 to 30 (Mean= 24.78, SD= 5.05).

Cultural adjustment scale (CAS) developed by Nasir (2011) was used for measuring international students' adjustment level. The instrument has three dimensions: adjustment to work, adjustment to interacting with host nationals, and adjustment to the general environment. The scale included 22 items and all items were rated on a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Procedure

The participants of the study were personally contacted in their free time and briefed about the instrument. The scale took 10-15 minutes to be completed so all the students gave their responses at the spot and returned the instrument. The academic achievement of the students was taken in terms of Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) after completing their first semester in university.

Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS-12) was used for data analysis. Cronbach alpha was computed for determining reliability of the scale and correlation among the sub-scales was found to determine the validity of the scale. Correlation analysis was performed to see the relationship between cultural adjustment and academic achievement and regression analysis was performed to determine the predictive significance of cultural adjustment for academic achievement.

Results

Reliability of the scale was determined by Cronbach alpha that was .75 for overall scale and for three sub-scales it ranged from .60 to .71 that indicated moderately high internal consistency (Table 1).

Table 1

Alpha Reliability Coefficients of CAS and Three Sub-Scales

Name of scale	Sample Statements	Alpha coefficient	No. of items
CAS		.75	22
General Adjustment (GA)	I feel sad living in unfamiliar surroundings.	.67	8
Socio-Cultural Adjustment (SCA)	I feel uncomfortable to adjust to new cultural values.	.60	8
Work Adjustment (WA)	It is difficult for me to work with local people.	.71	6

Correlation of cultural adjustment scale and its three sub-scales with academic achievement of international students was examined by calculating Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient.

A significant correlation was found between overall cultural adjustment and academic achievement ($r = .37, p < .01$). Academic achievement was also significantly correlated with the three sub-scales: General adjustment ($r = .28, p < .05$), Socio-cultural adjustment ($r = .25, p < .05$) and Work adjustment ($r = .30, p < .01$).

There was a significant difference in the mean CGPA of students with high CAS scores and low CAS scores (Table 2). The mean CGPA of students who scored above the mean on CAS was significantly higher than that of the students who scored below the mean on CAS ($t = 2.01, p < .05$).

Table 2

Comparison of Mean CGPA of Students with High and Low Scores on CAS.

Variable	CA Groups	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	<i>t</i> -values
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CGPA	High	60	2.91	.446	.062	2.01*
	Low	46	2.72	.443	.075	

* $P < .05$

Regression analysis was also run to see the predictability of cultural adjustment for academic achievement foreign students. Standard regression analysis (Table 3) revealed that cultural adjustment significantly correlated with GPA ($R = .362$) and explained 13% variance in GPA ($R^2 = .131$, $F(1, 104) = 12.341$, $p < .01$).

Table 3

Regression Analysis for Cultural Adjustment Predicting GPA of Foreign Students

Criterion	Predictors	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate	F
GPA	Cultural Adjustment	.362	.131	.120	.426	12.341**

** $p < .01$

The mean scores of male and female students on cultural adjustment scale were compared through *t*-test (Table 4). There was no significant difference in the mean of cultural adjustment scores of male and female students.

Table 4

Comparison of Mean Scores of Male and Female Students on CAS

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	t-values
CAS	Male	48	75.48	10.004	.820	.789
	Female	58	74.68	8.226	.613	

Discussion

The results of this study indicated the importance of cultural adjustment for academic success of international students. These results are consistent with previous research in the related field. The study revealed a significant correlation between cultural adjustment and academic achievement of international students. The result can be compared with the study conducted by Chen, Rubin and Li (1997) who found a significant relation between social adjustment and academic achievement; and these results are also comparable to the study of Gabel, Dolen and Cerdin (2005) who

found that the ability to adjust in a new cultural and social environment can predict success in international assignments of global manager.

The results showed that the students having higher scores on cultural adjustment scale showed better academic performance (Table 2). The coefficient of correlation of academic achievement with Work Adjustment scale had the highest value. This scale involves interaction with other people and Huntley (1993) on the basis of literature review affirms that students with better interpersonal skills pass easily through adjustment process.

Cultural adjustment had significant predictive value for academic achievement of foreign students (Table 3) and explained 13% variance ($R^2 = .131$) in GPA. These results can be interpreted in the light of research literature related to adjustment problems of international students. As asserted by Furnham (2004), international students confront more difficulties than do native students and these difficulties can cause physical, psychological and academic problems. Though, foreign students show better adjustment in a new culture (Savicki, Burnette, Heller, Binder, and Suntinger, 2004) they have to face more problems during initial transition period than have native students (Furnham, 2004; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, and Van Horn, 2002).

No significant difference was found in the overall adjustment scores of male and female foreign students (Table 4). These findings are supported by the study of Haslberger (2007) who found no gender difference in various dimensions of expatriate adjustments including day to day interaction and general conditions.

In the light of these findings it can be concluded that lack of cultural adjustment in the international students may have adverse effects of on their academic achievement. Students with inadequate cultural adjustment may find academic task more difficult and they show poor academic performance. The institutions of higher education have responsibility to understand the problems of their international students which they face during adjustment process. The institutions should provide necessary support in order to facilitate these students for attaining their aims for which they are living in a different cultural environment.

In order to make the adjustment process of international students smooth and easy, it is required to provide them the opportunities to interact with their host community. The educational institutions may acquaint international students with the host culture through orientation sessions and appropriate social activities. It is also a responsibility of the host nationals, who may be the members of the academic cohort

or neighbors of international students outside the institutions, to show understanding and recognition for cultural diversity and awareness of social justice so that the international students can easily pass through the process of adjustment.

It was a limited study that was confined to the international students of the public universities in Islamabad; however, it may provide a base for further research and exploration of problems that international students, studying in various educational institutions in Pakistan, face during adjustment process.

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