

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Experience of International Education of East Asian Students in English-speaking Countries: A Four-Dimensional Approach

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## *Abstract*

*Global participation in international education in the last two decades has increased exponentially. International students face difficulties in adjusting to the culture of their host country due to their unique needs (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser & Kumar, 2014). This article presents themes comprising the international education phenomenon involving the experiences of East Asian international students in English-speaking countries. The literature reviewed for this article pertains to many aspects of international education, covering the factors that influence the decision to embark on the international education journey to the adjustment experienced by students to the host culture. The authors suggest that the international education experience is comprised of four dimensions: structural, linguistic, internal, and external. We also posit that Confucianism, which many East Asian students follow, influences not only the psycho-social dimension of the international education experience but also their instructional preferences within the structural dimension. We further contend that students' actual and perceived proficiency (or the lack thereof) in the host country's language greatly shapes all aspects of the student's international education experience, which then determines the degree of acculturative stress involved and plays a key role in each of the three dimensions.*

*Because of the anticipated continued growth in the number of international students from East Asia attending higher education institutions in English-speaking countries such as the United States, Australia, Canada, and parts of Africa, it is important to examine how each of the dimensions proposed impact each other. Approaching the study of the international education experience one dimension at a time, as many scholars have done, does not completely address all of the unique needs of international students. We suggest that research in this area be conducted holistically by exploring the ecology surrounding the international student. Taking this ecological approach will help clearly define the role that home and host countries and host higher education institutions must take in serving the international students well.*

## **Keywords**

*acculturation, campus climate, Confucianism, engagement, international education, language, psychosocial, student development*

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## *Introduction*

The body of knowledge on international education is broad and multi-faceted. While varied in theoretical approach and focus, an over-arching theme that binds these works is the recognition that, because of their unique needs, international students face difficulties in adjusting to the culture of their host country. In addition to this theme, a deficit model appears to undergird the exploration of the experiences of international students. East Asian students attending universities in English-speaking countries are particularly painted in a deficient way, often subject to acculturative stress due to difficulties in adjusting to the host country's culture and language. In understanding this sub-group of international students attending universities in English-speaking countries, it is important to note their Confucian traditions and that instilled in their behaviour is the value of harmonious integration of opposites. Characterised by the popular 'yin and yang' concept, Confucianism, as it relates to learning, includes: placing a very high value on education for the purpose of gaining knowledge (more so than practicality and work experience); seeing learning as a moral duty; knowing that learning involves reflection and application; studying hard as a family responsibility; respecting teachers and knowing that they care about their students; and seeing teachers as models of morality and knowledge (McMahon, 2011). This mindset shapes how international students with Confucian traditions experience international education.

Relative to their Confucian tradition, this paper presents the themes, as gleaned from the literature, comprising the international education phenomenon involving the experiences of East Asian international students in English-speaking countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, parts of Africa, and Canada. We posit that these themes reflect the dimensions of the international education experience. Shown in Table A, these dimensions are the Internal or Psycho-social, the Institutional or Structural, the External or Socio-economic, and the Linguistic dimensions.

Following the discussion about these dimensions are recommendations offered to improve the international student experience, particularly for the aforementioned East Asian international students in English-speaking countries. These recommendations are borne out of our extensive experiences as student affairs professionals in various universities in the United States that host large numbers of East Asian international students.

Table A

Internal (Psycho-social)	Structural (Institutional)	External (Socio-economic)
Personal values and culture influence experience	Institutional support enhances learning and development	Socio-economic forces influence student mobility (push-pull)
Positive personal attributes moderate acculturative stress	Social interaction shapes experience	
Tension between native values and host values		
Confucian philosophy's emphasis on harmony can lead to adaptability in instructional preferences		
<b>Linguistic</b>		
Language proficiency moderates acculturative stress		

**Internal: Psycho-Social Quadrant**

The study of international education cannot be done without discussing culture. Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions is used (Gahan & Abeysekera, 2009; Tan & Liu, 2014) to provide context to the native traits of international students that influence their ability or inclination to adapt to foreign ways of behaving and thinking. A number of studies (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser & Kumar, 2013; Broesch & Hadley, 2012; Falcone, Espi, Ashai, Butler & Franco, 2013; Pritchard, 2011) use the sociological perspective of Acculturation Theory (Berry, 2008) to explain the different orientations to acculturation that students may adopt during their sojourn. Understanding this concept is important given that East Asian international students, who struggle to adjust to the individualistic orientation of Western pedagogy and student development programmes (McMahon, 2011), compose the largest sub-group of international students in the United States. According to McMahon (2011), Chinese students attending universities in the United Kingdom experience culture shock with regard to the student-instructor relationship. In their host country, this relationship is normally more structured and is bound by curricular or professional needs and interests whereas at home, there is more extra-curricular mentorship that extends to personal matters. The process that sojourners go through to deal with these differences is known as acculturation.

Research on international education reveals the fundamental role of acculturation in the experience of international students. "In broad terms, acculturation refers to an immigrant's process of cultural, psychological, and social adaptation to the culture" (Martinez, 2016, p. 44) of the host country. Acculturative stress arises from problems with psychological, cultural, and social adaptation (Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac & Elsayed, 2013). Studies using the construct of multicultural personality, assertiveness, and academic self-efficacy (Lee & Ciftci, 2014; Roesch, Wee & Vaughn, 2006) explain why some students adjust to their foreign environment better than others. Using the psychological

perspective, these studies identified the factors influencing the way a sojourner experiences international education. Two of these factors are explained here.

One, possessing the personal characteristics of universal-diverse orientation, personal growth initiative, and hardiness with the student's adjustment enables an international student to have a less stressful and less challenging adjustment to the new environment (Yakunina et al., 2013). These personal characteristics reduce the degree of acculturative stress encountered by these students. Two, personal values influence the way international students experience the unfamiliar world around them. As part of one's culture, personal values "are students' individual value characteristics that shape their evaluation of the factors related to the internal and external learning environments, thus influencing student experience and satisfaction" (Arambewela & Hall, 2013, p. 976). Arambewela and Hall's (2013) study of the relationship between students' on- and off-campus environments and their satisfaction of the international education experience, shows that respect for self and from others, self-fulfillment, belongingness, security, accomplishment (which make up self-efficacy) and the sense of fun and excitement (which make up the hedonism construct) have a mediating influence on student satisfaction. In particular, there is a positive relationship between students' self-efficacy and satisfaction with their learning environment within the university. "Students with greater self-efficacy attributes are motivated to maximize the benefits of the services and facilities within the university environment" (Arambewela & Hall, 2013, p. 982). While a positive relationship between self-efficacy and satisfaction exists, Arambewela and Hall (2013) also suggest a negative relationship between hedonism and student satisfaction. Given the primary goal of East Asian international students to study and achieve academic success, "if international students have too much fun and enjoyment in community life, their academic achievements are likely to be less satisfactory" (Arambewela & Hall, 2013, p. 982). Awareness of how the hedonistic construct impacts student satisfaction has implications for the policies and procedures surrounding the provision of student services to ensure student success.

Other studies suggest that the engagement of East Asian international students in leisure is not altogether detrimental to their success abroad. Their participation in on- or off-campus campus leisure activities facilitates their acculturation and adjustment to college (Gomez, Urzua & Glass, 2014). Attendance at social events or engaging in sports with other students is a way for them to establish a strong social network. Their interactions with host nationals or other international students provide them a sense of belonging and security that motivates them to venture outside their comfort zones and engage in unfamiliar activities (Glass, 2012). The significance of engaging in these activities is especially highlighted by pre-arrival notions shaped by Western movies. College life in the West is depicted in movies as primarily about having fun (Bourke, 2013). Given this delicate relationship between their academic success and acculturation, higher education administrators and staff responsible for providing guidance to international students must be aware of the importance of striking a healthy balance between encouraging students to enjoy the cross-cultural experiences their host country offers and the need to focus on their studies. Awareness of the interplay between these psycho-social factors within the internal

dimension of the international education experience can help student affairs professionals in developing programmes that will enhance the acculturation of international students. The next section discusses the factors located in the institutional quadrant of international education.

### *Institutional: Structural Quadrant*

Institutional support in the form of curricular and co-curricular activities that facilitate student learning and development is crucial to the academic and personal success of students. As suggested by Chuang (2012), being innovative in providing instruction to East Asian international students aligns with the capacity of this group to adapt to various approaches to instruction. This openness and flexibility in learning styles is attributed to the Confucian values of harmonious integration, virtuous behaviour, and respect for authority which Chuang (2011) found to intensify, rather than diminish, as Asians acculturate to the Western society. In addition, there are positive findings in other areas. Zhao, Kuh, and Carini's (2005) study indicates that international students engage with their faculty, accept academic challenge, and use computer technology (which is an important skill in the 21st century) more than their domestic counterparts. As it relates to East Asian students that have a Confucian orientation, McMahon's (2011) research shows they are more accustomed to having a close mentee-mentor relationship with faculty members because, from their Confucian point of view, teachers serve as mentors to students. These expectations impact the level of satisfaction international students experience in their academic environment. Purveyors of international education should be interested in increasing the satisfaction of this sub-group with their experience on-campus.

Universities in the United States conduct programmes geared toward enhancing the freshman experience. New student orientations and first-year experience classes have become common practices geared toward facilitating the transition of students from high school to college life (Terenzini & Reason, 2005). First-year classes designed for international students can potentially provide similar transitional assistance. As seen in Kovtun's (2011) study, those who participate in first-year classes (1) gain understanding of social diversity in the United States, (2) improve their skills in writing, oral presentations, and research, and (3) enhance their psychosocial development (i.e., balance, persistence, optimism, strong will, resilience, diligence, self-confidence, and positive attitude). These are examples of how institutional structures can benefit international students.

Extending learning beyond classrooms, student affairs professionals, evident in the work of American organisations such as the NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education and the Global Community for Academic Advising (NACADA), focus on providing programmes and advice services that foster lifetime growth and development in students. The co-curricular activities they offer, i.e., on-campus socials, athletic events, student organisations, service learning, and leadership programmes, provide the social context that international students need to engage with the domestic as well as other international students to explore and challenge their belief systems and cultural practices. Participation in such programmes impacts the development of a global

perspective of international students and others who engage with them (Chickering & Braskamp, 2009). Multicultural curricular and co-curricular activities enhance the student participant's sense of belonging which has been suggested to have a buffering effect against negative experiences of discrimination and to constitute a contributing factor to positive academic outcomes (Glass & Westmont, 2014). These positive outcomes rest, however, on the international students partaking in activities developed for them. As Yan and Berliner (2011) reported, international students tend to not interact with Americans and typically confine their social interactions within circles composed of their co-nationals. This behaviour further isolates this group from the mainstream which potentially impacts their psychological health in a negative way.

Exacerbating the problem arising from isolation from the mainstream is the reluctance to use services available on-campus. In spite of the known acculturative stress they face, the number of international students seeking assistance from university counseling centers is low, suggesting that their first choice of support for their mental health needs are their friends, family members, clergy, and physicians (Yakushko, Davidson & Sanford-Martens, 2008). This issue has been raised in the international education arena. In *Internationalization in US Higher Education: The Student Perspective*, Mazon (2010) calls for the bridging of the gap between traditional student affairs professionals and international student affairs professionals “so that all students have an enhanced opportunity to take advantage of international programming that is less isolated, and more integrated into students' broader campus experiences. In this way, international students will be more fully integrated into the campus” (p. 208). Thus far, findings of the studies we have cited underscore the importance of actively engaging the academic community in the conversation about the unique need of international students. In the next section, we discuss how external factors impact their motivations and dispositions abroad.

### ***External: Socio-Economic Quadrant***

Research on what drives student mobility points to ‘push’ factors within the student's home country. Factors that lead student decisions to participate in international education include economic, social, and political forces (Biao & Shen, 2009; Yan & Berliner, 2011). For example, for families and students from mainland China, the decision to embark on international education is attributed to the disparities in access to higher education, goods, and career opportunities at home. Inadequate supply of higher education institutions in their country, immigration prospects, and better employment ‘push’ students to go abroad. Parents of these students willingly take on the financial burden imposed by this cross-national educational venture in order to attain the goals of economic progress they have set for their children (Bodycott, 2009). Embarking on international education, despite the stress that goes with it, is a way to improve their opportunity to improve their situation.

Although considerably motivated by these push factors, the acculturative stress felt by international students does not become any less because of the lack of social support abroad (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser & Kumar, 2014). Acting upon the Confucian philosophy's

emphasis on education and the value of filial piety that closely binds the students to their families back home, they feel immense pressure to succeed as international students. With Chinese students, “parents place great emphasis on the academic achievement of their children ... and receiving higher degrees from the United States brings honor to the family ... [and is] a guarantee of social and economic ascent either in China or in the US” (Yan & Berliner, 2011, p. 179). The expectation that the investment in one’s international education will generate income and lead to economic progress for the family places enormous stress on the international student. While stress to perform well in school is natural, this stress is compounded significantly for international students who also face intercultural challenges. From their study, Mitchell, Greenwood, and Guglielmi (2007) posited that “the actual academic performance of international students was not significantly different from that of the U.S. students. However, the anxiety about academics may be due to the unique demands of studying in a foreign country” (p. 127). Their stress cannot be ignored and must be planned for by the universities they attend. Similarly, as discussed next, the importance of services geared toward the development of their English language proficiency must be addressed.

### *Linguistic Quadrant*

Underlying the three dimensions that have been discussed is linguistic proficiency. Miller-Cochran (2012) describes a number of innovative approaches to teaching English to second-language learners. The role of language is central to the experience of East Asian international students in English-speaking countries. In order to gain admission into universities in English-speaking countries, as non-native English speakers, international students must demonstrate proficiency in the English language through the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS) that predict their academic performance.

Satisfactory scores in these tests do not however automatically translate to language proficiency once in the host country. As second-language learners, these students have to spend more time studying compared to their domestic counterparts primarily to overcome language difficulties (Daller & Phelan, 2013). International students placed in English remedial classes are less likely to persist in their freshman year than those who are non-remedial students (Mamiseishvili, 2012). The language challenge is exacerbated by differences in academic training. For example, based on Coates and Dickinson’s (2012) study, international education scholars learned that East Asian postgraduate students come without prior experience in report writing and constructing “English essays of more than 1000 words” (p. 299). This difference in academic training poses immense challenges which, when not overcome, may result in other non-academic issues. Inability to overcome the language barrier does not only lead to poor academic performance (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014) but also leads to diminished self-reliance (Hung & Hyun, 2010), and increased perception of discrimination (Karuppan & Barari, 2011). More serious psychiatric issues have been linked to academic difficulties and poor language skills among

East Asian students (Mitchell, Greenwood & Guglielmi, 2007). The following describes the depression experienced by international students who struggle with the English language:

School was really ... it was really terrifying. I was barely speaking (English) when I came ... trying to keep up with the notes and other things in class. I didn't have the opportunity to learn English in [my] school. I was feeling really bad about that. I was kind of ... I balanced my depression at the time because I think everyone gets depressed the first time they come here [USA] ... depressed because, umm, it happens ... people get depressed.  
(McLachlan & Justice, 2009, p. 30)

Acculturative stress arising from lack of proficiency in English impacts the East Asian students' ability to have a full international education experience. The perception of having limited communication skills hampers positive socialisation. Non-citizen students in English-language countries (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland & Ramia, 2012) who are unable to communicate in English feel they lack human security. Without the feeling of security, international students will avoid participation in activities involving non-Western individuals and confine their socialisation within groups of co-nationals. The studies discussed here demonstrate the need to approach these complex and interconnected challenges with an equally compelling and interconnected array of solutions. We recommend an ecological approach that addresses these four dimensions.

### *Recommendations for Practice: An Ecological Approach*

Numerous studies have been conducted to investigate the relationship between international student satisfaction and various factors that include campus climate (Glass, 2011), ability to gain proficiency in the English language (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014), and engagement with host nationals (Glass & Westmont, 2014). Studies also indicate the benefits of institutional support to international students. Given these factors that impact the international student's experience, the outcome of the international student's academic pursuits largely depends on what higher education institutions do to facilitate their success. Referred to as the internationalisation of higher education, this trend is not achieved simply by increasing the number of international students enrolled in the universities. Rather, it requires a more comprehensive approach that involves increasing the cultural intelligence and sensitivities of faculty, students and professional staff. We offer the following recommendations on how internationalisation of higher education can be achieved in universities.

First and foremost, we must acknowledge and account for cultural influences impacting traditional student development theory application. Recognising the tension between native values and beliefs and those of the host country, it is essential that we concede that the values and cultural beliefs of the international students will influence their experience, and therefore we should adjust our programmes and services to honor this reality, thereby diminishing this tension. This adjustment requires an openness to learn from our international students and a willingness to embrace ideas and beliefs that may be

foreign to our way of being. We must also help our international students to identify and reflect upon their personal values and goals for their international experience and connect traditional co-curricular and social activities to international students' values of community and belonging, rather than notions of fun and social excitement. Self-awareness and cultural awareness among student affairs professionals are crucial to their ability to empathise with the challenges faced by international students from non-English countries.

Next, we need to improve institutional structures to create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for our international students. This can be achieved by creating spaces and opportunities to shape social interactions that promote and enhance learning and development. Expanding existing First Year Experience programmes for international students by emphasising their strengths in using technology and their desire for greater academic challenge can be achieved by incorporating a focus on the history of higher education in the United States and the role that international students have played in that history. Institutions must find ways to encourage social integration of international and domestic students on campus. Peer support and mentoring programmes can fulfill the dual role of reducing the acculturative stress of international students while building the cultural competency and perhaps language skills of both the domestic host students and their international counterparts.

Incorporating a Confucian philosophy which emphasises balance and harmony in our practice can assist students in finding a balance between the push and pull factors, thereby helping to alleviate stress and improve the collegiate experience for our students. Knowing the incredible amount of stress our international students carry as a result of the personal and financial investment they and their families have made in their education, we are obligated to offer counseling and support services in a manner which our international students will find welcoming and accessible. This may require special outreach efforts, ensuring our staff is diverse, aware and trained in cultural issues, and even investing in bilingual counselors or language translation services as it may be especially difficult to make meaning of and communicate feelings when your vocabulary is limited.

Finally, the impact of lack of English proficiency leads to other more serious problems of safety, self-esteem, and limited socialisation. In order to foster the success and development of our international students we must address the language issue in all aspects of our programmes and services. Acknowledging the multi-linguistic abilities of our students, we can learn a few key phrases in order to welcome them and show a sign of respect. Creating "language partners" can help international students practise their English speaking skills in a non-threatening environment and enhance their socialisation to our campus. We should also acknowledge the need for and a place where international students can engage in their native tongue free of judgement and stress. We must acknowledge that language is key to the success of these students and set high expectations for advancement in this area while simultaneously granting them both the patience and support for them to improve their language acquisition.

## Conclusion

The international student experience can be viewed through four interrelated dimensions: internal (psycho-social), structural (institutional), external (socio-economic), and linguistic. Scholars of international education use theories pertaining to acculturation and student development to understand how international students experience these dimensions. The underlying philosophy of Confucianism of seeking balance and harmony serves as a unifying factor across these dimensions.

As the participation of East Asian students in international education continues, the need to understand this particular international student experience and their corresponding needs becomes greater and more urgent. The multi-dimensional nature of this challenge calls for a holistic approach to student services. This article provides strategies for student affairs professionals to improve campus climate and enhance linguistic proficiency through programmatic efforts that attend to the acculturative stress experienced by East Asian students. As a relatively new trend in higher education, universities need time to develop the strategies and means to deliver culturally responsive student services. While few, there is evidence that universities in the Western hemisphere are recognising this unmet need and have started to invest resources in this arena.

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