

CULTURE SHOCK AMONG VIETNAMESE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: CAUSES, EFFECTS, AND RECOVERY

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ABSTRACT

The data from various sources, such as the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training, private consultancies, and international reports indicate that Vietnam is one of the major sources of international students globally, with Korea, Japan, Australia, and the US being the most favored destinations. The factors that influence Vietnamese students to seek higher education abroad are academic reputation, quality of education, and permanent residency opportunities in the developed countries, especially the English-speaking ones. This paper aims to explore the phenomenon of culture shock and its impact on international students who seek higher education abroad. These students have many opportunities, but also face difficulties when living and studying in new environments. One of the challenges that they have to cope with is culture shock. The paper starts by defining culture shock and examining its main sources and effects. Afterwards, it provides some suggestions on how overseas students can prepare for and overcome the difficulties of cultural adaptation. Lastly, it proposes some actions that can be implemented by the host institutions and communities to facilitate the academic and social integration of international students. Therefore, this paper is beneficial to international students in general, overseas Vietnamese ones in particular, who intend to pursue higher education in foreign countries.

1. INTRODUCTION

Many Vietnamese students who pursue higher education choose to study in the countries where English is official language, as they are attracted by their academic prestige, quality of education, and prospects of permanent residency. According to the latest data published by the Department of International Cooperation, Ministry of Education and Training, for the academic year 2019-20, approximately 190,000 Vietnamese students were enrolled in foreign institutions of higher learning. The most preferred destinations were Europe, Japan, Korea, Australia, America, and Canada. (Binh, 2023).

In Vietnam in 2021, the Ministry of Education and Training said it was coordinating to manage nearly 200,000 Vietnamese international students of all types studying abroad and directly managing about 6,000 Vietnamese international students, of which 4,000 people studying under the Agreement and 2,000 people under Government projects (Nguyen, 2023).

Based on the data from private entities, such as Capstone Education Vietnam - a consultancy that offers services for studying abroad and career guidance - Korea was the most popular destination for Vietnamese students who went overseas in 2022, with 66,000 individuals, followed by Japan with 37,000. This figure encompassed interns and students who enrolled in short-term or non-degree programs. As per the Australian Department of Education, in May 2023, Vietnam was the 6th largest source of international students in Australia (Binh, 2023).

The Fall 2023 Snapshot on International Student Enrollment presented the patterns of international student enrollment in the U.S. for the academic year 2023-2024, based on the feedback of more than 630 U.S. colleges and universities. The report, carried out by the Institute of International Education (IIE) and ten other higher education groups, which was a supplement to Open Doors 2023, supplied a source of detailed data on international students from the 2022-2023 academic year. Its key findings revealed that leading the number of international students in the US were China (27%) and India (25%). Next were Korea and Canada accounting for 4% and 3% respectively. Vietnam continued to rank 5th in the group of countries with the largest

number of students studying abroad in the US (2%). There were 21,900 Vietnamese international students in the US in the 2022 - 2023 school year.

Pursuing education overseas, particularly in advanced nations, offers many opportunities to Vietnamese students. Nevertheless, they also face obstacles when residing and learning in novel settings. One of the hardships that cross-border students have to endure is culture shock. The aim of this paper is to examine the phenomenon of culture shock and its implications for learners who pursue their education in foreign countries. The paper begins by defining culture shock and identifying its main causes and consequences. Next, it offers some recommendations on how overseas students can prepare for and overcome the challenges of cultural adjustment. Finally, it suggests some measures that can be taken by the host institutions and communities to support the academic and social integration of international students.

2. CULTURE SHOCK

2.1. Definitions of culture shock

In 1960, 'culture shock' was the term first used in the short article by Oberg, an anthropologist. According to him, culture shock is the nervousness we feel when we lose all the usual cues and codes of social interaction. He also listed some of the features of culture shock.

- stress from the effort needed to adjust psychologically to the new situation
- a feeling of losing or missing friends, relatives, and belongings
- refusing to accept, or being excluded by, the people of the new culture
- uncertainty about one's role, expectations, values
- shock, worry, even anger and resentment after realizing the cultural differences
- helpless feeling due to the inability to cope with the strange situations.

For a long time, students who went abroad to study encountered many difficulties: academic challenges, linguistic barriers, accommodation, financial problems, social isolation, health and leisure, and racial discrimination (Hammer, 1992). Many young people who go overseas often talk about culture shock, which is the feeling of being lost and confused in a new place (Furnham, 2004).

Culture is a broad and unclear idea that covers a lot of aspects such as senses, beliefs, customs, actions and thoughts. These aspects can vary greatly among countries. Therefore, people encounter many different beliefs, customs and lifestyles when they leave their homeland and go to a different place. This is particularly the case for those people who experience a new culture that is unlike their own. Expatriates, people who do not live in their own country, face a lot of challenges when they encounter a different culture from their own. They cannot comprehend the values and actions of the natives, and they are unsure of their own roles and expectations. They feel lost and confused when they cannot recognize the usual cues and codes of social interaction. They have to adjust to new ways of living, working and doing business in a foreign environment (Xia, 2009).

Jandt (2018) described culture shock as the confused and worried emotions which a large number of people feel temporarily when they live in a different country. It

happens when one realizes that their usual beliefs about life and their habitual actions are not suitable or effective anymore.

2.2. Main causes of culture shock

Culture shock is caused by the stress that comes from losing all the familiar ways of communicating and interacting with others. These ways include many things that we do to adjust to the everyday situations: how to greet people and what to talk about, when and how much to tip, how to deal with service staff, how to buy things, when to say 'yes' and when to say 'no' to invitations, when to be serious and when to joke. These ways, which can be words, gestures, facial expressions, traditions, or standards, are learned by all of us while growing up and are an important part of our culture, just like the language we speak or the beliefs we have. All of us rely on hundreds of these ways for our comfort and our effectiveness, most of which we are not consciously aware of (Oberg, 1960).

When a person goes to a different culture, they lose most or all of the familiar ways that they used to communicate and interact. They feel out of place and uncomfortable. Even if you are very open-minded and friendly, you feel like you have lost your support and you become frustrated and anxious. People have similar reactions to the frustration. Some students have traveled a lot before they study abroad, but that does not mean they are fully prepared for the differences they encounter. In fact, research shows that going abroad many times does not make culture shock less likely, but it may help people to know what to expect and how to deal with it (Furnham, 2004).

A lot of research had been done on psychological challenges and needs of international students. Two main sources that lead to culture shock was identified by Sandhu and Asrabadi in 1994.

- Internal factors: Feeling a deep loss of family and friends; feeling inferior; feeling unsure about the future.
- External factors: Language barrier and lack of social skills; differences in cultural expectations and social norms; loss of social support systems, especially from family; other factors such as education and immigration difficulties; making friends and building social support networks.

The study by Forbes-Mewett et al (2011) explores the mental health challenges faced by international students at a university in Australia. It draws on the views of sixteen professionals who work closely with this group of students who offer their insights on the factors that contribute to the increasing prevalence and intensity of psychiatric problems among them. The research identifies three main factors that seem to increase the pressure and difficulties for international students: the need to adapt to new and different academic expectations, the demand for a wide range of knowledge and skills to live independently in the host country, as well as the reluctance to seek expert support for psychiatric problems.

By interviewing ten Vietnamese learners, Le (2018) aimed to examine various facets of how Vietnamese students coped with cultural adjustment in Germany and propose some ways to cope with it. Vietnamese students encounter significant cultural shifts when they relocate to Germany. They have to leave behind their accustomed cultural context and learn a lot of new cultural information, for instance, language, educational system, style of communication, social etiquette, etc. This causes mental exhaustion. Mental tiredness can also happen when Vietnamese students have a strong attachment to their original culture that affects their ability to understand German culture. One of the main reasons for culture shock is the cultural differences that creates bewilderment, miscommunication and clashes between Vietnamese learners and German people. The study reveals some important distinctions between Vietnamese and German cultures. The first difference is between individualism and collectivism shown when learners working in teams. Vietnamese students may consider German students as impolite and self-centered team members because they prefer to improve their own performances rather than maintain the group's harmony. Different perceptions of time can also cause cultural conflict. Germans treat time as a scarce commodity; therefore, they plan their time carefully. Vietnamese, however, think time is abundant, so they are more adaptable with their schedule. This explains why Vietnamese learners are astonished by how Germans are governed by time in their education and daily activities. Some Vietnamese learners who miss due dates can be seen as idle and chaotic.

2.2. Effects of culture shock

2.3.1. Negative symptoms of culture shock

Jandt (2018) notes that culture shock affects people in different ways and to different degrees. People can have not only physical but also mental symptoms.

- Physical symptoms include worrying too much about the hygiene of food, bedding, and dishes; feeling very anxious about their healthy and safe conditions; refraining from touching anyone in the foreign land; being bothered by slight aches and skin problems; longing for familiar food; abusing alcohol and drugs; and performing poorly at work.
- Culture shock can have a harmful effect on a person's mental state and cause many different kinds of symptoms. Not all people will have the same symptoms, but most people will have some of them (Xia, 2009). Mental symptoms include having trouble sleeping, feeling tired, feeling isolated and lonely, feeling confused, feeling annoyed, complaining about the new country, feeling nervous, doubting oneself, feeling irritable, feeling depressed, feeling angry, and withdrawing emotionally and intellectually. Mental health problems encompassed a wide range of issues, from 'emotional' and 'stress' issues to the more severe mental disorders of depression, psychosis and suicidal tendencies (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011).

2.3.2. Drawbacks of experiencing cultural disorientation

Culture shock can have a negative impact on intercultural communication. As a result, immigrants or visitors communicate less effectively. For instance, intercultural receivers may think that the immigrant or visitor is being rude when they are actually frustrated with the new culture. Intercultural communication receivers should be aware of the challenges of culture shock that a person may face (Jandt, 2018).

When people experience a lot of depression, anxiety and helplessness, they may become more and more confused and lost in their minds. This can make it hard for them to focus on learning new cultures. Also, their problem-solving and decision-making skills may be affected. This can lower their desire to adjust to the new situations. The most critical thing is that if people cannot overcome the signs of culture shock, they may develop negative feelings towards the local people, which can harm their social relationships (Ferraro, 2006).

2.3.3. Positive aspects of experiencing cultural differences

Culture shock has adverse impacts on international students with varying levels of severity. Nevertheless, experiencing phases of culture shock also confers some advantages to those overseas ones.

Xia (2009) found that reducing mental discomfort is essential as soon as encountering culturally unfamiliar settings. Nevertheless, one vital aspect that needs to be attentively considered is the fact that coping with culture shock does not imply the complete eradication of adverse emotions. First, it is unfeasible to eradicate tension entirely. Second, a reasonable degree of anxiety and sorrow may motivate sojourners to acquire the different culture and harmonize with the intercultural setting (Ferraro, 2006). Hence, confronting challenges with the suitable disposition as well as turning unhappy moods into happy energy might help international students in preserving psychological well-being and alleviating transition shock effectively. Moreover, a specific amount of stress can inspire enthusiasm for cultural acquisition that may accelerate humans' adaptation to different cultural circumstances.

Pham & Saltmarsh (2013) examined how international students from Vietnam use their social networks to shape their identities based on their experiences of studying in Australia. It demonstrated how international students manage and surmount cultural disparities to cultivate new perspectives of themselves that would assist them in accomplishing certain roles and enhancing their initial identity. The most important benefit that Vietnamese international students get is self-improvement. The most salient personal changes for Vietnamese students involved developing autonomy and independence in decision-making for everyday situations. They thought they adapted to fit in with new living situations and circumstances where they had to take care of themselves instead of depending on their parents.

3.MITIGATION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS PRIOR TO DEPARTURE

To mitigate psychological distress, individuals must undertake various measures to cope with cultural differences prior to travelling overseas. This phase is commonly referred to as pre-departure. It is a crucial and necessary step. By effectively utilizing this stage, the individual can significantly reduce the adverse effects of cultural shock on their mental well-being. Two primary strategies are recommended during this phase: comprehending the phases of cultural shock and preparing oneself before departure (Xia, 2009).

3.1. Understanding stages of culture shock

The first thing to do is to understand the stages of culture shock, which can help people anticipate the challenges they may face in a different cultural setting. According to Adler (1975) and Pedersen (1995), as cited in Jandt (2018), culture shock has five stages. The first stage, also known as the honeymoon phase, is when things are strange and thrilling. The person is basically a visitor with her or his core identity rooted in the home culture. The second phase involves the loss of familiar signals and the irritation and resentment with the disparities experienced in the new culture. The sojourner can feel incompetent or become isolated. The third stage includes the recovery of new signals and a better capacity to function in the new environment. However, the feelings experienced at this stage are often rage and bitterness toward the new culture for “not being the same.” As the fourth stage progresses, the person slowly adjusts and gains more autonomy, while recognizing the strengths and weaknesses of both the original and the new cultures. The person feels less out of place in the new culture as more things are predictable. Loneliness is reduced, and people feel more confident and relaxed. When the sojourners have attained biculturalism and developed the ability to cope well in both the home and new cultures, they reach the last phase called reciprocal interdependence. Getting fully adjusted to new environments takes a long time.

Being aware of the stages can be very helpful for people who wish to prevent the psychological strain from culture shock. There are two reasons for this. First, unclear and vague events can cause more stress. To address any problem, people need to recognize what it is. Likewise, being cognizant of what is going on can help people

alleviate negative feelings and stress. Another factor that affects stress is how certain and manageable the events are. The more people can foresee and control the events, the less stressful and confused they will feel (Lafreniere & Cramer, 2005). Culture shock is a peculiar phenomenon that many people face, but it is neither explicit nor foreseeable, so it can have a severe impact on their mental health. However, if they are aware of the stages of culture shock, they can have some predictions about what they will encounter in each stage. This can enable them to overcome the difficulties and obstacles more efficiently and peacefully, and also decrease the degree of depression, anxiety and despair (Jacobs, 2003).

3.2. Predeparture preparation

To minimize the language barrier in host countries, it is recommended that Vietnamese students acquire a fundamental level of proficiency in a foreign language prior to their enrollment. This will facilitate communication, as the locals are more receptive as sojourners attempt to use the former's language from the beginning of the dialogues. Moreover, students should acquire cultural knowledge of the country they are visiting, such as the norms and taboos. The degree of understanding of a new culture is inversely proportional to the magnitude of the negative impact, as cultural knowledge augments individual ability to adapt to the novel situations (Coodman, 1994). It is imperative for them to comprehend the nature of culture shock, its implications for their lives, and the strategies to mitigate its effects. Anxiety should not be underestimated, as it may have more severe consequences than students anticipate. Students are also encouraged to establish relationships with individuals who have previously resided in the destination city before embarking on their journey, for the purposes of obtaining social support, guidance, and advice particularly during the early phases when many things are novel. In addition, enhancing not only their prior knowledge but also travel experiences will facilitate students to engage in more meaningful conversations with their international peers (Le, 2018).

3. DIMINUTION OF PSYCHOLOGICAL STRAIN THROUGHOUT THE EXPERIENCE

The pre-departure stage is crucial for the individuals that wish to mitigate the psychological strain caused by cultural fatigue. However, the stage of living and studying / working abroad is more important. Sufficient preparation can improve new-comers's capacities to adjust to foreign environments as well as boost their self-esteem. Nevertheless, culture shock cannot be completely eliminated, as a good preparation only mitigates its impact. Hence, the strategies to diminish mental tension during the experience need carefully examining. The reduction of psychological stress during the experience comprises receptivity to the novel culture with an unbiased perspective, engaging in a part-time job while pursuing foreign education, and assistance from host institutions and communities.

4.1. Receptivity to the novel culture with an unbiased perspective

Students ought to be cognizant of the potentiality of cultural disparities. Furthermore, they should possess a receptive disposition and readiness to conform to the host culture (Le, 2018). Acceptance is a method that entails recognizing the values and behaviours of other cultures as neither good nor bad, but simply different. By doing so, people can achieve a higher level of comfort and reduce psychological stress. However, this method is not without challenges. People must comprehend not only the actions and beliefs of others, but also the reasons behind them, with great enthusiasm and delight. Thus, interest, curiosity and willingness are indispensable, and any hesitation or reluctance in acceptance will result in more psychological discomfort (Phillips, 2003). Nevertheless, it is not possible to accept every aspect of a different culture. This is an inevitable occurrence. In such a situation, being tolerant and open-minded toward the local culture might be more feasible than eager acceptance. Moreover, striving to adhere to the regional practices and heritage may also be a comparatively simple method, which might act as a prerequisite for the assimilation of a new culture.

4.2. Having a part-time job while undertaking overseas study

A number of factors motivate Vietnamese students who pursue international education is the chance to engage in part-time employment. The primary reason is to generate

additional income since handling their own financial affairs was exceedingly stressful, especially for those encountering economic hardships (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2011). For some families, economic concerns are very pressing because pursuing overseas education is rather costly. A part-time job abroad will enable students to alleviate the financial pressure on their families. It not only suffices to cover personal living expenses, but some of them also manage to save enough to pay tuition fees. Another advantage of combining international education and part-time work is the enhancement of soft skills. Earning one's own income fosters self-reliance and financial literacy. This requires us to plan our expenditures more prudently and intelligently. Furthermore, soft skills such as time management, problem-solving, and communication skills are also cultivated organically. Thirdly, working entails frequent interaction and communication with native speakers. This facilitates the improvement and refinement of one's foreign language skills in a rapid manner. If learners obtain employment in the domain of their studies, they will acquire more expertise and advance their professional trajectory. Moreover, forming new relationships in this period is also crucial, as they can facilitate their transition to a secure, long-term career. This may also create a possibility for permanent residency. Therefore, combining international education and work will enable students to access novel prospects in life.

4.3. Support from host institutions and communities

Bochner et al. (1977), as cited in Furnham (2004), proposed a functional model friendship patterns of international students in a research on foreign learners in Hawaii, asserting that the participants take part in these social communities:

- A principal monocultural network includes good rapport with fellow friends from the same country. Its primary purpose is to provide a setting where ethnic and cultural identity could be exercised and expressed;
- A supplementary bicultural network consists of connections between sojourners and prominent host nationals such as scholars, learners, counselors and authorities. The function is to support international students in attaining academic excellence and assimilating to the different environment; and

- A third-level multicultural system of associates and contacts facilitates companionship for recreational, non-cultural and non-purposive actions.

Some contend that the quality of social help is more crucial than its provider. Nevertheless, other people believe that the support sources are more important. Hence, a host-national system of support is essential since it enables international learners to attain the social skills in resident environment. Assistance from conational systems is necessary as it enables those sojourners to keep their original customs and traditions. It is thought that the welfare of overseas learners hinges on their access to those two kinds of connections. Nevertheless, the data shows that many international learners do not engage in a feasible native link (Furnham & Bochner, 1986).

The aim of international education is to enhance intercultural awareness, which necessitates the incorporation of cultural diversity in the syllabi and instruction of universities that offer international education. International education practices should consider socio-cultural elements and their inherent connection to identity as significant components that influence overseas students' learning aspirations, involvement and contribution. In Pham & Saltmarsh (2013)'s research, the Vietnamese learners who were pursuing their education in Australia established their identities based on their traditional culture and their experiences with cultural diversity. The international world is not prescriptive or mandatory to them. Sojourners are individuals with their unique histories and biographies manifested through their opinions and interactions with people in their neighborhood. By understanding the challenges and barriers that shape international students' awareness of differences, universities can recognize learners' viewpoints, aspirations and objectives, and establish learning goals which encourage them to communicate and engage in their communities. The recognition of international learners' adaptation of discrepancies generates possibilities for universities to cultivate connections and social intercourse that promote positive actions that integrate students instead of segregating them.

Social assistance is regarded as a beneficial strategy in the process of stress management, which involves people receiving comfort, care, support, guidance, affirmation and help from their social network. The people who have supportive friends deal with stress more effectively. As soon as social help diminishes, prevalent

mental disorders such as unhappiness, anxiety and powerlessness increase. Cross-cultural studies confirm the significance of social support. People living in environments that highlight interconnection undergo less mental distress than people living in cultures that accentuate self-reliance. Therefore, social assistance helps to mitigate possible adverse consequences of landmark events and daily challenges (Lafreniere & Cramer, 2005).

Encountering culture shock is not a cause for stress, as it can occur to anyone and anywhere while being in a novel circumstance. Hence, sojourners need to be assured that they can overcome culture shock little by little. It is essential for students to share their difficulties with the suitable individuals who can offer them guidance and solace. Such individuals may comprise of peers, fellow students, cohabitants, neighbours, mentors, international facilitators, or Vietnamese groups. Feelings of isolation will be significantly reduced when students acknowledge that they are not suffering in solitude and that there are people who are ready to assist them (Le, 2018).

According to Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer (2011), delaying the treatment of mental health issues often led to the worsening of these conditions, requiring students to undergo more intensive interventions than they would have otherwise needed. Some of these conditions could become suicidal if left untreated. The authors observed that international students were prone to postponing seeking professional assistance for their mental health issues. It was also reported that many of them had let their issues reach a critical stage, which necessitated immediate intervention, whereas their problems could have been resolved if they had sought help earlier.

4. CONCLUSION

This article discusses the phenomenon of culture shock and its prevalence among overseas students due to cultural diversity. The discrepancies between cultures induce feelings of unfamiliarity in individuals, which results in significant psychological distress, manifested by signs of sadness, fear, and despair. This paper presents effective solutions to prepare for and cope with the symptoms of culture shock. It provides guidance for students who are either entering new educational settings or undergoing cultural shock, on how to prepare beforehand and mitigate the adverse impacts of psychological stress on their well-being. Prior to entering a new cultural environment, it is essential for all individuals to make adequate preparation and comprehend the stages of culture shock. Subsequently, when experiencing culture shock, receptivity to the novel culture with an unbiased perspective, engaging in a part-time job, and social help are considered as useful ways for many sojourners resolve mental anguish. Moreover, a moderate degree of stress can stimulate interest in cultural learning, which might facilitate individuals' adjustment to novel cultural contexts. Hence, alleviating mental strain to a manageable level is more feasible than complete eradication.

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