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# Academic and socio-cultural adjustment among Asian international students in the Flemish community of Belgium: A photovoice project

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## ABSTRACT

An increasing number of students from Asia participate in the global educational market. However, due to the large cultural disparity between Western and Asian countries, their adjustment is particularly challenging. As there is a lack of research exploring Asian international students' adjustment processes in Europe, we used the Flemish community of Belgium as an illustrating case to study the experiences of Asian international students in a non-Anglophone study environment, with a focus on their academic and socio-cultural adjustment. The method of photovoice was applied. This research technique enables research participants to visually represent themselves or share lived experiences with an audience by photographing the world as they see it. Five Asian international students from KU Leuven were recruited as research participants. They participated in an information session, two rounds of photo taking and two focus group discussions. The participants experienced academic adjustment challenges in four domains: (1) academic activities, (2) academic resources, (3) languages and (4) time management. Participants' socio-cultural adjustment was summarized into two broad themes: (1) cultural differences and (2) socio-cultural adjustment strategies. The findings suggest that for aspects of the host culture that are relatively easy to adapt to, participants generally tend to adopt an integration or assimilation acculturation strategy, while for primary cultural values and ideologies, students are more likely to adopt a separation strategy. Potential strategies for faculty and policy makers to respond to these challenges are discussed.

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## 1. Background

Studying abroad has been described as an enriching experience for students leaving their home country (Yang, Webster, & Prosser, 2011). Nowadays, an increasing number of students from Asia participate in the global educational market. Figures show that Asian students occupy 52% of the international student population worldwide (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2011), and China and India are the top two exporters of foreign students across the globe (Altbach, 2009). Most international students pursue their further studies in Western countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and France (OECD, 2011). Asian international students may experience a great deal of unfamiliarity in almost every aspect of their life in Western countries because of the differences in language, culture and

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educational systems. The adjustment processes of Asian international students in foreign countries have therefore received a great deal of attention during the last couple of decades.

Adjustment is interpreted by Anderson (1994) as “working toward a fit to the person and the new environment”, which further refers to people trying to adapt to a change of situations (p. 299). How people perceive and evaluate the challenges and obstacles arising from change can determine how they adjust to new situations (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999, p. 130). The adjustment of international students is particularly challenging, as they will have to cope with a dual challenge. Like every freshman entering university they need to adapt to the academic life. In addition, they have to deal with the acculturation stress encountered by every sojourner (Church, 1982, p. 544; Li & Gasser, 2005; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002, p. 363–364; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006, p. 422). A number of theoretical frameworks on adjustment processes have been developed, including the one from Anderson (1994), who developed a cross-cultural adaptation model that outlines four major stages: “cultural encounter”, experiencing “obstacles”, “response generation” and the “overcoming” phase. The model focuses primarily on the effects of obstacles and negative experiences on sojourners (Ramsay et al., 1999, p. 130). However, positive experiences can also influence the adjustment process for people residing temporarily in foreign countries (Langston, 1994). In this study Berry’s bi-dimensional acculturation model (1980) will be used as a guiding framework to discuss and link the findings on adjustment processes with the theoretical concept of acculturation. Acculturation is the degree and amount to which an immigrant individual can adapt to the cultural norms, values, behaviors etc. of the host society (Ward, 1996, as cited in Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006, p. 422–3). It mainly refers to an individual’s attachment to his or her own ethnic identity and openness toward new identity development (Brisset, Safdarb, Lewisb, & Sabatiera, 2010, p. 416; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006, p. 431). An individual’s attitude toward cultural change and cultural continuity can potentially result in four orientations. Integration refers to individuals retaining many personal and cultural values, but adapting to the dominant culture by learning necessary skills and values. Assimilation is a strategy used by individuals seeking to become part of the dominant society to the exclusion of their own cultural group. Separation is applicable to those who retain their culture of origin and do not adapt to the culture of the host society. And finally, marginalization refers to individuals who perceive their own culture as negative and detach from it, but are unable to adapt to the majority culture. (Berry, 1980, as cited in Berry, 1997, 1999).

It is demonstrated in past studies that the greater the culture of the host society differs from that of the sojourners’ home culture, the slower sojourners will adapt, and more effort is expected to be devoted to adjusting to the new environment (Kagan & Cohen, 1990, p. 133; Swami, Artech, Chamorro-Premuzic, & Furnham, 2010). Value conflicts between the two cultures have been reported as having a negative effect on the acculturation of individuals. These value conflicts refer, for example, to differences in world views and religious beliefs (Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Caldwell, & Utsey, 2005, p. 58). A study conducted by Rienties, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, and Kommers (2012) showed that non-western international students faced significantly more social, personal and emotional integration problems compared to native Dutch students, Western and mixed Western international students. As is commonly recognized in the literature, adjustment of international students is a multi-dimensional field which often encompasses three major domains: academic adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment and personal psychological adjustment (Brisset et al., 2010; Ramsay et al., 1999; Ward & Kennedy, 1993; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). In what follows we will present an overview of the findings from studies describing experiences of students studying in foreign countries, with a focus on the adjustment processes of Asian international students. A short summary is provided in Table 1.

### 1.1. Academic adjustment

Academic adjustment can be referred to as the degree to which students cope with the various demands in an educational context, including for example their motivation and academic performance (Rienties et al., 2012, p. 687). Students who succeed in academic adjustment tend to show better study results (Rienties et al., 2012, p. 696). Ramsay et al. (1999) investigated the positive and negative experiences impacting on the academic adjustment of both international and local Australian students. They found that a Learning Assistance Center was reported most often by international students as being beneficial for their studies, while peer support in study groups, tutors and tutorials were more often mentioned by local students. Negative experiences were often related to lectures or lecturers. The authors identified difficulties in understanding the lectures, which may be a result of either lecturers’ poor communication skills or international students’ lack of English language skills.

### 1.2. Socio-cultural adjustment

Socio-cultural adjustment is conceptualized by Searle and Ward (1990, p. 450) as the “ability to fit in and to negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture”. Several authors have reported on factors that facilitate socio-cultural adjustment of international students. These include close contact with host nationals, social support, involvement in extracurricular activities, good language skills, less perceived discrimination and longer periods of stay (Constantine et al., 2005; Swami, 2009, p. 58; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006, p. 431).

Friendships with host nationals tend to increase life satisfaction, and decrease feelings of homesickness and loneliness of international students (Church, 1982, p. 552). Through contact with local communities, international students gain new knowledge and understanding of the lifestyle, values and customs of the host society. Many phenomena which seem strange

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