

# Learning Experiences and Academic Adjustment of International Students: A Case Study from Pakistan

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**Abstract**—Academic adjustment has been a major problem of foreign students in International Universities. This paper presents a qualitative study exploring the classroom issues based on the difference of learning experiences of the foreign students in a Pakistani University. The research employs a case study methodology with the data collected through an essay writing task set for the students and interviewing the teachers teaching international students. 103 foreign students and 10 teachers constituted the sample of the study. The studies found that majority of the international students acculturate the learning experiences they brought with them from their homelands in order to adjust in the academic environment of the host university.

**Index Terms**—academic adjustment, international students, Pakistan, learning experiences

## I. INTRODUCTION

Foreign students at International universities have always been a source of academic and economic contributions towards their host and sending institutions, for which foreign learners have gained considerable importance in higher education. However, the purpose of international universities is not only to recruit international students, its aim is educating the students for cross-cultural knowledge and to develop communicative competence, more capability and competitiveness in the international professional market (Stacy, 1999). Higher education is becoming more diverse due to different cultural and educational backgrounds of the international students (Hewitt, 2002). Hence education providers should recognize the needs and expectations of international students from different cultural and academic backgrounds, and effectively assist them to achieve their goals (Stacy, 1999). While taking the decision to study abroad, many international students come across difficulties in their academic expedition to be rationally successful in their new learning environment (Carol and Ryan, 2005). They have to face different social and cultural norms and values from the ones they have known, different modes of teaching and learning and different expectations and conventions about participation and performance.

To sustain these learners, the universities need to address the adjustment issues these students face due to the difference of their learning experiences, because one of the major problems of the students joining International universities is that of the adjustment in the academic environment of the host institution. Generally, when international students come in the class, they usually bring their own cultural attitudes towards learning. Their successful approaches of learning in their previous course of study, earlier practices and assumptions lead them into an intense state of “learning shock”. Their previous educational experiences usually push them into unexpected academic situations which ultimately affects their performance. It is always significant to unbolt and use their learning experiences and approaches they bring with them (Carol and Ryan, 2005). As they become a great source of improvement for teaching international students. A contribution of this study, despite its limited sample and delimitation to one university, is that it not only draws attention to the effect on the academic adjustment of the foreign learners but also to the need for the universities and teaching staff to become more sensitive to student’s problems of adjustment in a new learning environment and differences that may exist, in order to maximize students’ learning. The findings may have relevance to teaching and learning context in other international institutions with similar cross cultural student population.

This paper identifies the difference of learning experiences of the international students and its effect on their academic achievement by investigating the multiple learning experiences of the foreign students. As, there is a need to explore their learning experiences which they bring from their own countries, to examine the learning difficulties they have encountered, the challenges they have met and the strategies they have adopted to make academic adjustments in the host university. The two main objectives of the study were: To help academicians and educational managers to devise new strategies for the improvement of the existing strategies in teaching international students and to assist the international students in developing better study approaches. Learning experiences of the foreign learners formed the focus of this study with the development of a hypothesis that these learners come to join the International universities after making up their minds for cultural adaptation but they were unaware of the academic shocks they would be facing there.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Extensive works have been done by many researchers highlighting International students' learning experiences (Bamford, et al., 2002; Kiley, 2003). Studies on learning experiences of the International students in their host countries usually involve features such as cultural, psychological, social and academic adjustments (Edwards & Ran, 2006; Hewitt, 2002). Despite the widespread report of the difficulties International students encounter, majority of the International students make reasonable adaptation to their cultural and institutional demands.

Adjustment is a dynamic and interactive process that takes place between the person and the environment, and is directed towards an achievement of the fit between the two (Anderson, 1994). Thus Academic adjustment is a fit of a learner in the academic environment. Many researchers consider academic adjustment a complex process that impacts on all university students (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones and Callan, 1991). The major reason is that culture of education differs from country to country. For example, universities in advanced countries pay more attention on class participation and the educational approach in these countries looks unfamiliar to international students who are habituated to expect more guidance and support from teachers.

Language is considered one of the greatest academic issues hindering smooth adjustment for international students (Galloway & Jenkins, 2005). This Difficulty hamper in understanding lectures and lack of confidence in their second language inhibits them from participating in class discussions (Zhai, 2002). Similarly teaching styles and approaches that differ from those to which the international students are familiar in their own cultures may also be a source of complexity (Andrade, 2006, Zhai, 2002).

Thus, the importance of adjustment of the foreign students to the first year of the host university has always been a critical issue. With the increased foreign enrollments in the international universities, development and promotion of effective adjustment has become increasingly important and challenging to achieve the desired educational outcomes.

## III. METHODOLOGY

The present research was conducted in spring 2008 using the case study technique. Foreign learners of the International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI) were the case of the present study. All International students of IIUI constituted the population of the study. As per information provided by the admission office of the university, International students joining IIUI come from 45 different countries of the world but the sample turned out of the respondents from the countries providing majority of the International students (see sample). A total of 150 post-graduate International Students, enrolled in different disciplines, were randomly selected from the data gathered from the Admission Office of the university. Random selection technique was used in order to provide an equal chance of selection to the whole population. They were approached telephonically to get their consent to participate in the study. All the participants were fully informed about the study before hand. Out of 150, 122 agreed to participate in the study and 103 out of 122 came and took part in the diagnostic activity designed for data collection. This writing task diagnostic was carried out in the auditorium under the administrative control of the researchers with special arrangements under the Department of Education. Structured interviews were also conducted with 10 teachers of different departments teaching the International students.

The following informants formed the sample of the study.

### A. *Sample of the Study*

The sample was selected using convenient sample method. 103 postgraduate students (46 males and 57 females) and 10 teachers were involved in this study. They all received tertiary education and obtained Bachelor's degrees from their home countries before joining Master courses in IIU. Their ages ranged from 22 to 30 and the mean age was 26 years old. Seventeen participants had working experience prior to pursuing their postgraduate courses in Pakistan as per detail below:

| Country        | No of respondents |
|----------------|-------------------|
| China          | 38                |
| Afghanistan    | 18                |
| Somalia        | 16                |
| Indonesia      | 15                |
| Arab countries | 12                |
| Bangladesh     | 04                |
| Total          | 103               |

### B. Instruments of the Study

The instrument used to glean data regarding the research problem was an essay writing activity. An essay writing task was given to the foreign learners at IIUI for the purpose of collecting data to diagnose the problems faced by the foreign students in particular and to help teachers supplement their teaching with the strategies which can treat those problems. On the basis of data collected through this diagnostic activity, a structured form of interview for the teachers engaged in teaching International classrooms was administered in order to investigate the differences and explore the juncture of teaching strategies which can minimize the differences of the learning experiences in an international and a multicultural classroom. Interviews are often employed as an effective tool to understand people's experience and to suggest useful explanations or interpretations to collected qualitative data (Krathwohl, 1997). Therefore, face to face semi-structured interviews of teachers were conducted for the exploration of the participants' perspective on their teaching experiences regarding International students. Audio recordings of the interviews were made and transcribed afterwards and irrelevant details were omitted to shape them according to the requirement of the present study. Time of interviewing each teacher ranged from 25-30 minutes.

### C. Essay Writing Task: A Diagnostic Activity

The diagnostic task, for which some 50 minutes time was allowed, required students to write at least eight points on the given topic. They were instructed to address the issues like academic atmosphere, assessment system, medium of instruction, pedagogy and learning, along with any other difference they have noticed. The topic was "The difference of learning experiences in home and host institutions". Almost the entire population completed the task to answer the research question.

The information out of the essays was then systematically arranged into themes and concepts to develop preliminary categories for data analysis.

## IV. DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the study focused on students' responses to just one primary aspect in the diagnostic task: "*The learning difficulties faced by the learners due to difference in learning experiences between their home country and at IIUI, Pakistan*". The data obtained from the analysis of the students' texts, identified as potential differences included the following: academic atmosphere, assessment system, teaching methods, language issues and learning methods. Most respondents commented that teaching and learning approaches were dramatically different from those in their home institutions. Several explicit distinctions were reported while comparing their learning experiences in the host providers and their home providers.

Increasing number of international students prompt teachers to think about how they teach, what they teach and how to use students' previous learning experience (Carol and Ryan, 2005). The interviews conducted with the teachers engaged in teaching foreign students provided useful data to suggest some practical strategies useful for the adjustment of International students at IIUI.

## V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings revealed that most of the respondents experienced difficulties, discomfort and confusion for which they had to struggle hard to make their adjustment well. Following categories came out of the analysis of the diagnostic task employed for the present research.

### A. Assessment System

Data gathered from International students through diagnostic activity revealed that assessment system of IIUI is different from their home institutes. That difference put them in trouble particularly during their initial phase. Indonesian students stated that Pakistani teachers require a lot of length in answers but they were not used to of writing essay-type answers in their native institutions. They further stated that they are not satisfied with the marking/evaluation of Pakistani teachers. Great differences in assessment between Chinese tertiary education and that of IIU were reported. In Chinese institutions, assessment is mainly based on final exams whereas assessment in IIU may have various forms, such as assignments to be made throughout the semester, presentations, midterm exams, class participation and final exams. One of the Chinese student indicated that these assessment forms prompted him to change his learning strategies accordingly. He stated that "*Assignments prepared me for the final examination and were really beneficial*". Assignments

cannot be neglected because the assessment marks depends on them. Rust (2002) is of the view that assignments are a big source of knowledge which becomes a part of mind. When teachers were interviewed regarding the assessment procedures in practice, all the respondents said that they stress upon written assignments and presentations along with other patterns of evaluation. They added that in the beginning, assignments are a source of frustration (might be due to the difference of learning practices) among the international students but with the passage of time they get used to with the procedure and their input improves gradually.

### *B. Academic Atmosphere*

Academic atmosphere refers to the overall teaching learning environment of the institution selected as case for the present study. International Islamic university Islamabad, Pakistan has a distinctive feature of having separate campuses for males and female learners which is a major difference of experience regarding learning. Following are the prominent issues highlighted by the respondents of the study.

### *C. Separate Campuses*

Separate male and female campuses were highlighted as a different experience for majority of the international students joining the university. According to the data collected, 80% of the female respondents of the study stated that separate campuses makes them uncomfortable because of their isolation from male students who usually were a source of academic help throughout their course of study at home institutions. They further identified the importance of class discussions and assignments in co-education environment where males and females work together in groups and pairs on their projects and males use to take the loads of typing, printing and other tasks to be done outside the institution. Whereas, 20% of the female sample mentioned that they have joined this university only because of the separate campuses. Male respondents highlighted the case saying that this division seems unnatural as human beings are made for each other and their separation from any of the spheres of life is not desirable rather they should make the students learn to live together according to the teachings of Islam.

### *D. Library Issues*

Role of libraries is considered very important for academic services offered by educational institutions. Libraries not only provide students' highly academic support, they turn students' as autonomous learners (Callender, 1996).

This facility is generally an elaborated one at IIUI as compared to an average university overseas. Access to computers and to the Internet in the central library is extremely good, particularly amongst the higher education institutions. But again it is operating differently from others libraries due to the ideology of the division of male and female learners and is also a source of creating a difference of learning experience for international students on the campus. Majority of the respondents of the study, irrespective of the country they belong, claim that the division of library days creates a problem of discontinuity of tempo required for the accomplishment of any academic task. Computers in the library are also short in number and are also provided for one hour per student in which they can hardly complete their tasks. This reduces each student's library access three days a week.

Some of the Afghan students expressed very high about the provision of high quality books relevant to their field at IIU library comparing with the academic support facilities in their country. They further mentioned that text books are expensive and many students find it very hard to purchase them, but the rich central library covers up their economic handicap.

Majority of the students from Somalia were overwhelmingly about their experience at IIU particularly with reference to the computers, internet and digital library. They identified that they learnt the use of computer after joining IIU as they did not had such provisions in their institutions from where they graduated. They further stated that due to the lack of computer knowledge, they experienced difficulties in their initial days but they developed the skills as they recognized it beneficial for their learning.

### *E. Teaching Methods*

Teacher and teaching plays central role in educational institutions. They are the main source of students' satisfaction. The word "teaching" implies number of aspects including, imparting knowledge, providing relevant material and students' (Felix Tetel, 2004).

According to the responses of the interview data of the teachers, teaching international students, the teaching methods are mainly student-centered rather than teacher-centered. Students are expected to be active recipients of knowledge rather than passive listeners. This role of Pakistani teachers is believed to be greatly different from that of the experiences of international students joining IIUI as compared to that in their home tertiary education. Teachers in Pakistani university are considered as facilitators of the students' own independent pursuit of knowledge, not as managers. They provide students with more autonomy and try to cultivate their self-directed learning and independence.

"The way of studying here is different, compared with my country. Some of the teachers specially bring innovation in their teaching. Most of the time, they encourage us to participate and want us to be more independent in every aspect of the work we are doing".

Majority of the Chinese respondents commented that what they studied in tertiary education was mostly based on textbooks. Teachers usually followed the prescribed books, although they may give students some relevant course

materials. These comments are supported by Wan that in China, teacher's role is that of a transmitter of knowledge that is generally based on books (2001). The Afghan students stated that most commonly used teaching methods in Afghanistan were repetition, rote learning, copying and memorizing the text and very little or no student participation take place. The learners are merely passive recipients. Task-based learning or problem-solving activities such as discussions or classroom activities could hardly be seen. In general, there was no promotion of analytical or critical thinking on the part of the students. Learning was conceived as entirely a matter of memorizing the content of the textbooks. They mentioned that opposing to their home country experiences, majority of the teachers here prefer conceptual learning and provide students' opportunities to actively participate in classroom discussion and this change initially put them in a discomfort state. One of the reasons for this, they mentioned, was their poor communication skill.

Majority respondents stated that the teaching content at the International Islamic University was largely connected with contemporary practices, a student from the department of education, gave an example to illustrate her view: her teacher added to the teaching contents of the subject of Educational Planning and Management, right after the preparation of Educational Policy Draft of 2009. This suggests that the updated and practical content is used by the teachers in IIU to accumulate more practical experiences and to enrich teaching contents.

One of the Somali student stated that Somalia has one of the weakest educational "systems" in the world due to political fragmentation and instability. Among number of other key challenges for educational programming, one is its untrained personnel. Institutions of higher learning in their country have inadequate number of qualified instructional professionals who are aware of the modern teaching techniques to help students to find a place in today's modern world. They rely on old-fashioned teaching approaches that do not meet the global requirements of the 21st century. Contrary to this, the condition is far ahead here in IIUI. This difference discomforted the new students but afterwards exposure to a better situation made them learn a lot and get adjusted in the new educational environment.

#### *F. Learning Methods*

Working in groups also came up as a potential difference and most respondents regarded working/studying in group as a good way to share ideas among students and to learn from others' experiences. But many students find it difficult due to barriers such as language and multicultural backgrounds. They find it very difficult to be a part of any group. An international student expresses similar concerns:

"Working with the local students is never comfortable for me: Understanding them is not easy, as they are not good at speaking English and I too find it hard".

Group assignments assigned by the teachers could develop team spirit among the group members (Riechmann S, 1988). Working in groups was also reported as a new experience in the academic experiences of the foreign learners. However, it was found that most of them preferred individual assignments over group assignments. One reason they identified was that some group members do not take responsibility of their part and it dampen their enthusiasm for group assignments. Nauman, an Arab student, had a disappointing experience and claimed that "one of our group members never discussed with us, nor did he finish his part. We had to do for him, but he complained that he couldn't understand our points".

#### *G. Language Issue*

Although medium of instruction at IIU is English and Arabic. Majority of the students identified problems related with language. They were of the view that teachers do not have adequate command of English language. They use their native language so frequently and that mix coding in teaching produce bad effects on their understanding of the concepts. This factor limits the extent to which students participate in class. They further commented that teachers speak too fast in lectures and use local examples and expressions not familiar to them. They illustrate the ideas in their first language that made Pakistani students satisfied as they do not have a high level English competency.

"The lecturer tends to speak very fast, and most of the time, with a heavy accent".

Most of the respondents stated that they were reluctant to ask questions in class. Their reasons covered several aspects: being accustomed to keeping silence in class, language barrier, lack of confidence, and having no idea. They also indicated that they feel panic speaking in class because they were a minority group in the class. They further stated that their responses were not very much welcomed by the local students. One of the respondents said:

"My ideas have never been appreciated by the teacher and classmates both".

International students also reported that they remain quiet in the classrooms due to the cultural and linguistic differences; they feel fearful of making errors and being humiliated by the classmates. It was further said that the local students speak and discuss in their lingua franca which is alien to the foreign learners and cut them off the discussion. One of the respondents of the study stated:

"Students speak and generate discussion in a language not understandable by the foreigners".

On the other hand, teachers interviewed were of the opinion that at the tertiary level, students need proficiency of English because all teaching is in English, so university has to impose strict admission policy regarding English proficiency requirements. They said that the students from non-English speaking background must qualify a level test of English language proficiency before their admission to the university. It was reported by all the interviewers that the foreign learners are less participative and inactive in the classrooms due to their incompetency in the language of the instruction.

### H. Deprivation from Technology

Educational technologies in an institution provide a wide verity of academic support. Guolla (1999) was of the view that insufficient or poor quality of classroom facilities may frustration among students and related to this technology may be a source of satisfaction.

Scarcity of technological facilities at IIUI as compared to other international universities of the world failed to address the expectations of the foreign learners and was identified as a major problem. Majority of the respondents mentioned that multimedia and projector were not provided to them quite often and they were not able to work in a better way. Some commented that labs were not opened 24 hours which created difficulty for the students who had to complete their projects in time.

## VI. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Despite some of the limitations, this study is significant in that it explores strategic approaches to learning and teaching at the individual and institutional levels by presenting a comprehensive picture of the international students' difference of learning experiences and their academic adjustment in an international educational context. The study led to the findings that majority of the respondents had experience discomfort, confusion, and difficulty in adjustment to the host environment and they had to struggle hard to make their fit. Their adjustability problems were largely influenced by their previous learning experiences and the difference of experiences in their host institution.

The study also revealed that separate campuses sometimes were a source of frustration for the international students but at the same time they are a source of 20% higher intake for women campus. Student-centered or active learning teaching methods are widely practiced in order to impart life long education to the students joining the university. This sometimes becomes problematic for the international students but after the completion of one or two semesters they get themselves adjusted with the teaching methodology and also realize the advantages attached to the approach. Language issue in an international classroom is a natural phenomenon. Fortunately, Pakistan is doing better than its competitors in this regard and the focus of teaching in Pakistan has now shifted to the communicative approach. This approach being of a higher level creates a problem for the international students. To deal with the situation students are encouraged to spend more time learning English language which will further carry them to achieve their educational goals.

All the respondents reported that they had come here at IIUI without any briefing. In this context International students should be made aware of the academic environment prior to sending them abroad. There should be orientation sessions for them in their home countries and if they are not doing this, then it becomes the responsibility of the host university to arrange counseling sessions with the help of senior students already experienced and adjusted ones or they may be attached with the senior student from their home country for guidance to the academic norms and conventions of the host institution.

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