

# **THE ANATOMY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' ACCULTURATION IN BRITISH UNIVERSITIES**

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## **Abstract**

The diversity of the student population in the UK Higher Education (HE) sector in recent times accentuates the notion of the world being a global village. The effect of this on the British economy is considerable in terms of scale and significance. Nevertheless, research attention that specifically explore how overseas students integrate into the UK culture in the extant literature remains inadequate. Accordingly, this interpretive research fills the lacuna by exploring the acculturation of overseas students in the UK using a London-based University as the contextual platform. It shows the challenges faced by overseas students in the country, which include culture shock, discrimination, and limited opportunity for interpersonal relationships, and pinpoints how they could be addressed. It offers HE Institutions strategic directions for creating value for their target students in the highly competitive education sector.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, Overseas Students, Education, United Kingdom, culture shock

Multiculturalism is becoming increasingly palpable in the UK (see for example ONS, 2012, Taylor-Gooby and Waite, 2014; Gbadamosi, 2015) and has significant implications for the economy. For example, offering education for overseas students has been a source of income for many Higher Education (HE) Institutions in the UK for some time. Despite this, there is a dearth of recent empirical studies that specifically explore how overseas students integrate into this system in relation to the cultural, social, and educational structures in place in their home countries. Hence, this paper addresses this gap by exploring acculturation of overseas students at a London based university as a contextual platform. Essentially, a number of pertinent questions are addressed in this study: How do overseas students perceive and cope with the

culture ‘shock’ upon arrival at the UK Institution in relation to the differences in the pedagogical and curriculum approaches between their host and home countries? Do their families and social interactions enhance or inhibit their acculturation in this context and how could this be handled better? What specific interventions would be helpful to ease them into the system? Addressing these questions effectively will enrich our understanding of acculturation of overseas students in the British education system. Hence, they constitute the focus of this study.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND**

### *INTERNATIONALISATION OF BRITISH EDUCATION: A CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW*

The Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the United Kingdom (UK) have been very enthusiastic about attracting overseas students into the country (McMahon, 2011). With reference to IAU (2010), Hsieh (2012) shows that, in a survey of 115 countries concerning internationalisation of Higher education, 87% of the institutions have Internationalisation as part of their overall strategic Plan. This arrangement notably contributed \$27 billion to the US economy in 2014 (Guillotin & Mangematin, 2015). While international students troop to several Western countries such as Germany, France, Spain, Italy and Ireland for their higher education ambitions; the UK has been noted as the second most popular education destination (McClelland and Gandy, 2012). Meanwhile, there are various challenges confronting these institutions in the UK in recent years including competition and diminishing university funding (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka;2006; Hemsley-Brown, 2012; Leach, 2013). This competition is taking different forms and revolves around how universities position themselves in the marketplace (Webster, 2003; Yeadon-Lee & Hall, 2013). Evidence shows that, in recent times, universities with strong brand names are even exploring the establishment of overseas branches as effective strategy towards increasing their share of overseas students market and the

popularity of their brands (Wilkins and Hulsman, 2011). Some are looking at new and exciting ways to modify the traditional methods of education delivery such as using new technology for teaching and collecting feedback from students (Pence & Wulf, 2009; Zarraonandia *et al.*, 2013) and using Facebook as a Learning Management System (LMS) substitute, especially among the young students (Wang *et al.*, 2012). All these are now becoming crucial areas by which HEI compete to attract students.

Meanwhile, it has been suggested that the internal cohesion of the interdependent departments in the institutions is crucial to a good Internationalisation strategy in higher institutions (Jian and Carpenter, 2013). As the target market for these institutions examines their options, the criteria for doing so continue to expand in scope. Woodley and Wilson (2002) cites Levin (1976) to show four important criteria for evaluating how a nation's educational system offers an important equalising influence. According to them, these are the equality of educational access, of results, of participation, and of effects on life chances. Wilkins and Hulsman (2011) explain the determinants of international students' destination choices with the push-pull model. In this schema, push factors are those that operate within the home country such as lack of the specific desired courses in the indigenous institutions. On the other hand, the pull factors operate in the host country and make the place desirable to study or live. Their study shows that push factors had minimal influence in the students' choice of country and institution of study but pull factors were more significant in this regard. They categorised these pull factors as found in their study into 'overseas study is best for employment', 'improve my English overseas', and 'quality of education in the UK' (Wilkins and Hulsman, 2011: 78). This shows that the scope of overseas students' interest in educational institutions could be wide-ranging including the process of their adaptation to the new cultural environment in the host environment.

There is a contention that racism is a potent, detrimental force within British schools and endemic in the society (Siraj-Blatchford, 1991; Cole and Stuart, 2005), and there is a need for policymakers to challenge it at various levels (Archer and Francis 2005; Warren, 2007). Krahe *et al.* (2005) in a study on perceived discrimination of international visitors to universities in Germany and the UK found that those respondents in their study who could be identified as foreigners by their appearance noted more discrimination. However, apart from the fact that these studies are now dated which questions the extent to which we could rely on the arguments, there is still a great need for further inquiries at a deeper level to know how this impacts the activities of overseas students in HEI in the UK in recent times. Clearly, there are still some interesting lingering questions that can enrich our knowledge of the UK education system vis-à-vis overseas students. For example, to what extent is discrimination or racism a key factor in the education system in HEI today? In a study concerning Chinese students, Hsieh (2012) found that a lack of understanding of cultural connotations and background could be important to inter cultural communication as well as teaching activities. So, there seems to be a strong place for the discussion of culture in relation to both the home and host cultural systems of overseas students in the UK. Accordingly, Hsieh (2012) recommends that giving more cultural awareness training to lecturers and students can foster inter cultural relationships and communications.

#### *OVERSEAS STUDENTS' ACCULTURATION: INTEGRATIVE PERSPECTIVES*

Culture and acculturation are inextricably linked and very significant to international business and career development (Singh & Bartikowski, 2009; Gbadamosi, 2012; Viegas-Pires,

2013; Fregidou-Malama, and Hyder, 2015; Solomon *et al.*, 2016). People's culture defines the overall priorities they attach to various activities (Solomon *et al.*, 2016). Hence, it is logical to anticipate some degree of link between cultural values and overseas students' appetite for foreign education in a particular society. Meanwhile, drawing from Berry (1980), Martin (2005) traces the root of acculturation to 1880 in the study of anthropology. On this platform, it was developed to understand the change that occurs when more than one autonomous culture interact with each other. Accordingly, it is a worthy research endeavor to know how overseas students respond to the host cultural environment academically, socially, and culturally in the British education sector as they pursue their careers.

One of the phenomena central to the interplay of culture and acculturation is the notion of culture shock. It is defined as the anxiety that result from losing the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse and substituting them with other cues that are strange (Hall, 1959 in Brown *et al.*, 2010). There have been various theoretical postulations on how people experience culture shock in a strange environment. In the business world, it has been shown that success in cross-cultural assignments depends on the ability of the expatriate to adjust to and master new culture (Friedman *et al.*, 2009), as cultural intelligence (CQ) serves as a predictor of effectiveness for cross cultural effectiveness (Chen *et al.*, 2011). This is because individuals with high cultural intelligence (CQ) would adjust more easily to cultural diverse circumstances (Early and Ang, 2003; Chen *et al.*, 2011). The findings of Kelly and Morgan (2012) show the incidence of cultural shock for international mobile students who were accustomed to examination as a form of assessment in their home countries compared to other forms of assessment that are being used in the UK. This echoes the claim of Ragavan (2009) that international students are confronted with overwhelming emotion in the strange cultural environment. This is especially so as the effect of a learning environment can be different for

different groups of students (Severiens and Wolff, 2008). In a study that revolves around Chinese students in the UK, McMahon (2011) reports that the main issues about these students' experience of living and studying in the UK are difficulty in meeting British students, financial concerns, and lack of understanding of the health care system. He listed others as the importance of academic success, lack of confidence in English Language, and reluctance to ask questions in class. In a study on attitudes towards seeking professional help among Chinese students in the UK HEI, Tang et al. (2012) found that Chinese students exhibit significantly less interpersonal openness than British students.

As students experience intercultural adjustments, a number of reasons account for their culture shock. However, Goldstein and Keller (2015) found that students tended to attribute the shock to differences in external environment such as language and surroundings than to internal affective and cognitive factors like poor stress management. Besides, they found that students with higher level of cultural competence attribute shock to internal causes than those with low travel experience.

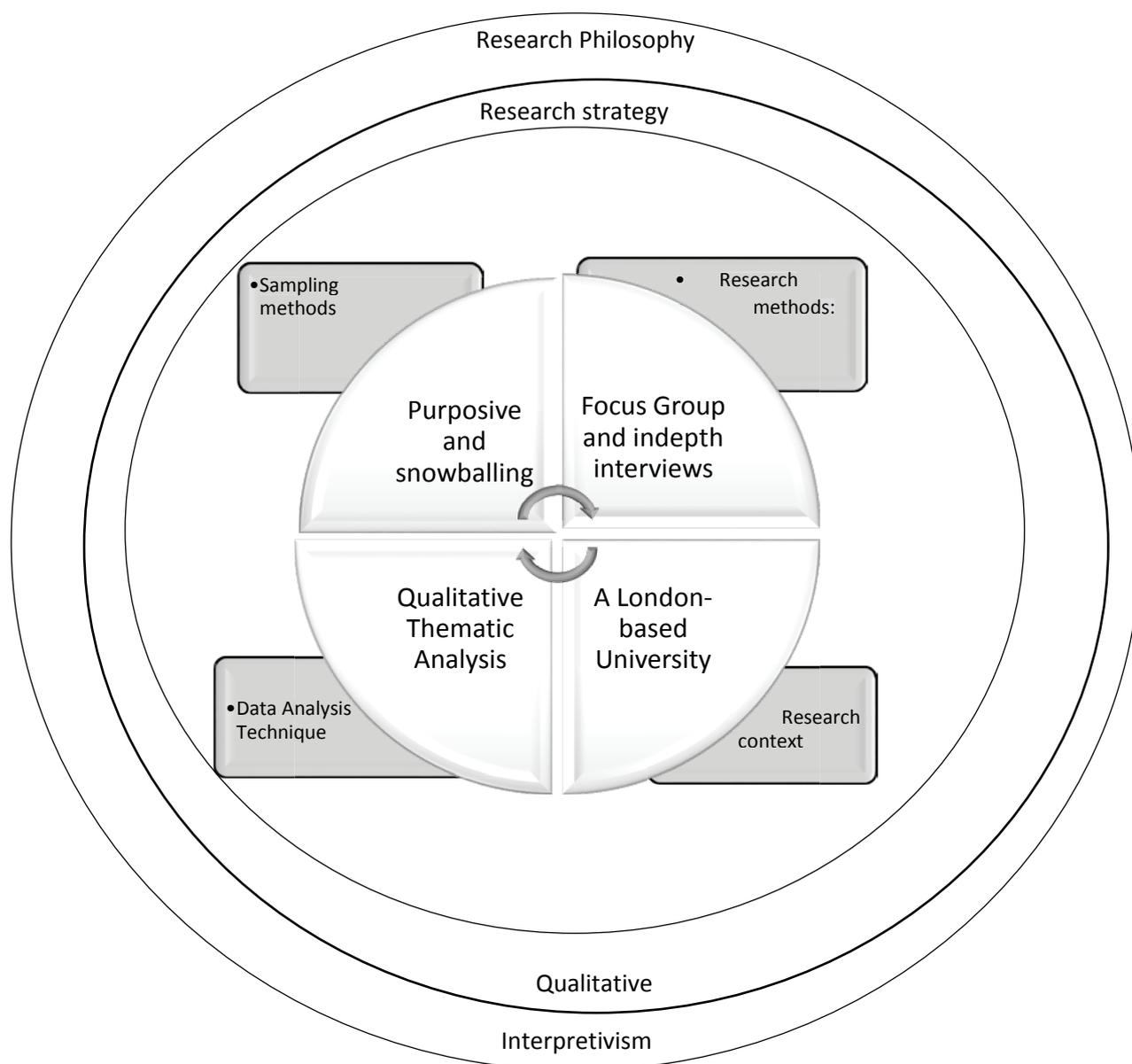
Given the impact of cultural shock on people moving to different cultural environments, the issue of how to overcome this challenge has equally attracted considerable attention. It is not uncommon for HEIs to have dedicated staff to look after this issue. For instance, Ragavan (2009) reports the effort of Newcastle Law school in appointing International Student Tutor to make these students find their feet in the new cultural system. However, the contention of Kelly and Morgan (2012) is that it will be logical for both the Institutions and the International students to adjust for a better and effective education support system to emerge and to overcome the culture shock in the system. Besides, Elliot et al. (2015) emphasize that the academic acculturation of student sojourner will involve managing both the old and the new ecological system. Li's (2012) study shows that as the students' support needs were not met

adequately in their institution, the assistance of the Local Volunteer Group (LVG) that consists of various members of which most are Christian, also comes handy. Similarly, Khawaja and Stallman (2011) found that students benefit significantly from joining some social organizations and activities to cope in the different cultural environment. Furthermore, they highlighted other coping strategies as developing time management, good organization, development of prioritization skill for the tasks, and learning about what constitutes interest of the domestic students. While this study and the findings relate to the Australian context where the study took place, the extent to which the findings reflect the UK context is yet unclear and is a worthy research endeavor. Meanwhile, the foregoing seems to lend support to the claim in Findlay *et al.*'s (2012) study that study abroad helps international students to accrue social and cultural capital. They also suggest that the 'world-class' education for some students is closely linked to a mobility culture that attaches symbolic capital to international living. Nevertheless, these postulations have not been adequately focused on overseas students' acculturation especially in the British education sector. Hence, this is a fertile research domain for updating the literature.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Figure 1 provides an overview of the methodological stance adopted in this study showing that the study is rooted in interpretive research paradigm. A combination of 4 focus group discussions and thirteen individual interviews were conducted with overseas students at a post-1992 London-based university during the 2013-2014 academic session.

Figure 1: Overview of the Research Methodology



All of these focus group discussions and the semi-structured interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Purposive and snowballing sampling methods were used for the recruitment of these research participants on the university campus with assistance from a paid Intern. The participants' details in relation to their countries of origin are shown in Table 1. Demographically, 10 of them were married, 26 were single, and 2 divorced. Those in the 18 -

29 age category were 22, those in 30-39 were 9, while those in the 40 -49 category were 5 and the remaining 2 candidates were in the 50 and over age group. The majority of the participants, 20, were in the university pursuing a first degree programme, while 14 were enrolled for different Masters' programme and the remaining 4 were on various other programmes of the university.

Table 1: Respondents' countries of origin

Country of origin	No. Of participants
Tanzania	1
Zambia	2
South Africa	3
India	5
Saudi Arabia	2
Afghanistan	1
Pakistan	4
Ivory Coast	1
Sierra Leone	2
China	2
Nigeria	6
Japan	2
Bangladesh	6
Namibia	1
Total	38

The issues of anonymity and confidentiality, voluntary participation, protection from harm and right to privacy were duly adhered to which are consistent with the recommendation of Fontana & Frey (1998) and Collis and Hussey (2014). Besides, the study was subjected to the scrutiny of the university Ethic committee which granted the necessary approval before the commencement of the study. *The qualitative thematic data analysis method* (Miles & Huberman, 1994) was used to tease out the emergent themes from the data.

The study is compliant with communicative validity, pragmatic validity, and transgressive validity which Sandberg (2005) proposed for justifying knowledge developed within interpretive studies. Communicative validity is about ensuring clarity in expressions, and could be achieved at the stages of data collection, analysis, and the discussion of the findings. These were all well adhered to accordingly. In this framework, pragmatic validity is about endeavouring to know if the respondents actually gave undistorted views of what they actually do. The use of follow-up questions during the interviews was adopted to achieve this as recommended by Sandberg (2005). Meanwhile, transgressive validity entails becoming aware of certain aspects of the project that might have been taken for granted. To address this, it has been stated that researchers should look out for ‘negative cases’ (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) which is also known as ‘deviance cases’ (Peräkylä, 1997) in addition to coherence. This was also achieved. Specifically, in this study while majority of the respondents mentioned culture shock, social interactions, and institutional support as part of the challenges they face concerning their settlement in the HEI in the UK, there is evidence of exceptional responses which indicate that, students that already have acquaintances in the UK system, are able to acclimatise more quickly by exploring these existing relationships. Besides, a different set of views of the respondents indicate that there are some institutional support for international students in the university, only that more could still be done.

## **SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The convergent view of the respondents shows a number of interrelated themes as linked to the explication of overseas students and their acculturation in the British education system, using a post-1992 London-based university as the contextual platform. The themes which are

interrelated and in some cases overlapping are Culture shock, Personal challenges, Integration, Institutional support, Government policy, and Value of UK education as shown in Figure 2. These are now discussed eclectically as follows:

### **Culture shock**

The shock experienced by the participants about the strange cultural issues in the UK compared to the systems in their home countries is considerable. These experiences range from issues that specifically border on their education to others that are tangential to it such as the transportation systems. In some cases, it relates to the ‘strange’ demands of the education systems like citations, referencing, and criticality in writing:

Okay. When I came here newly, it was actually difficult for me to adjust because even though we learn in English and we knew English back home, you cannot compare, because this is the origin of English. The way they use their sentences is quite different... So I find it difficult to understand them, and they also find it difficult to understand me (Female, married, aged 50 and above).

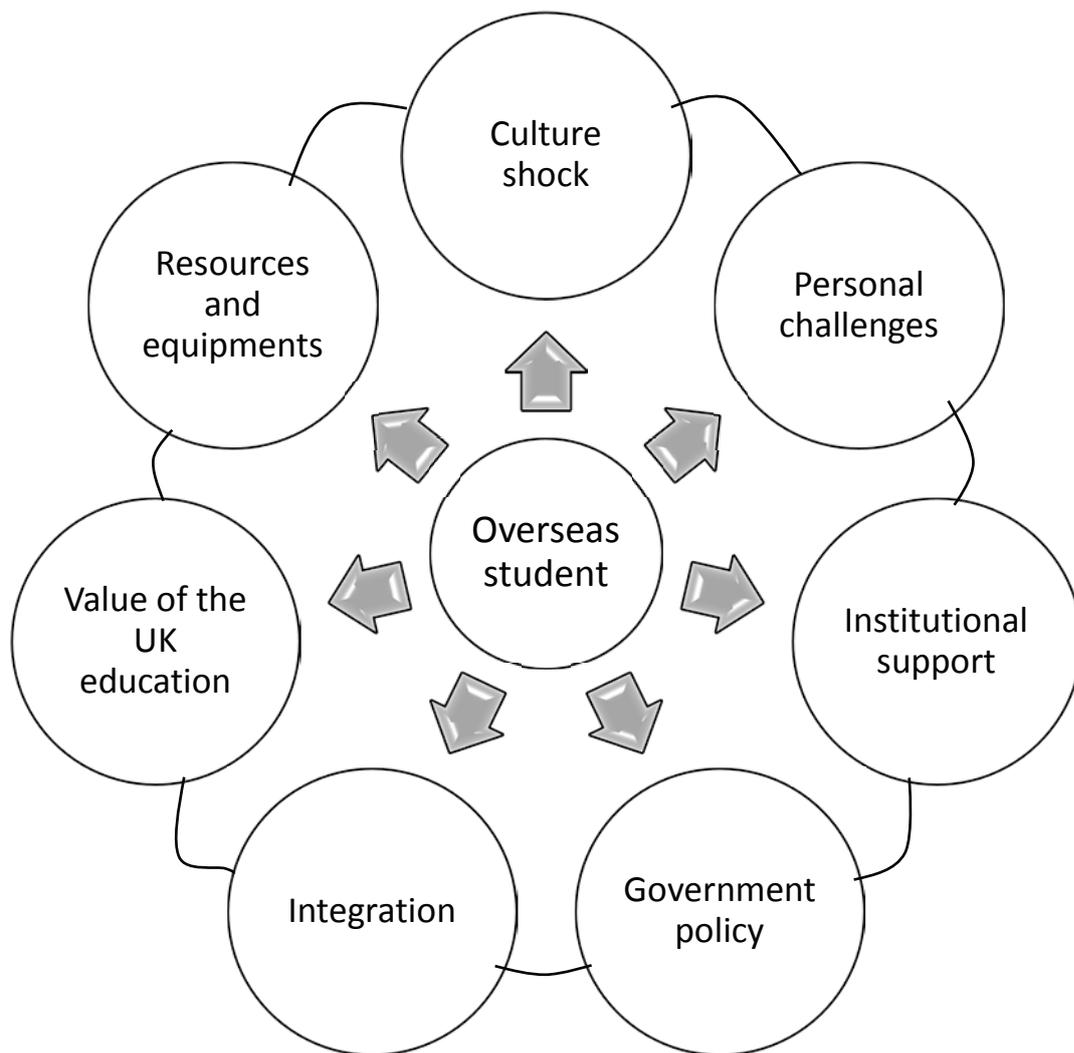
For me, adapting to a new culture was a challenge, so it took me some time to get used to the transport system and keeping up with appointments (Male, single, aged 18-29).

Those who have been previously penalised on the issue of plagiarism and lack of criticality previously described the associated emotional stress:

I can still remember that experience...I got an email from the office that I should come for a meeting about my work. I thought, oh! Why, why now? I was told I did not reference the authors properly in my work... It was as if my life was falling apart because I had other issues about my accommodation that I was battling with. I think I have now learnt my lessons... (Female, single, aged 18-29)

Nevertheless, they laud the system as good because the demands and differences they have encountered in comparison to what is in place in their countries communicate that their investments to travel to the country to study are justified:

*Figure 2: Overseas students' acculturation*



For me, my perception is that British education is of a high standard compared to the one in my own country... It is stable and you can predict when you are starting and when you are going to finish..' (Male, married, aged 40-49).

Other key issues stressed by the participants as very challenging for them in coping with the British education system include foods, and the weather condition.

### **Personal challenges**

Participants pinpoint that they experience challenges in the UK as a new cultural environment. These are wide-ranging. While some are directly related to their academic programmes, others are slightly outside this scope. Examples of these are noted as financial, accommodation-related, and difficulty in having social interactions with people, especially those with significant knowledge of the host value system that can direct them towards meeting their social needs in the UK:

In Bangladesh, we depend on our parents. We do not have to do any job, nothing. Our tuition fees and our expenses, everything, my parents pay, but here I need to work. (Female, single, aged 18-29).

The rent is very high and also they ask, 'Are you a student?' They do not like students. They want some professionals...Because I think students are just here for a short period, and you can move anytime (Female, single, aged 30-39).

The challenge of language and communication for the respondents in the UK is highlighted as one of the key issues which cannot be ignored, especially for those that are from non-English speaking countries. Even those who are somehow familiar with English language communication still feel that the challenge about communication at the early stage of their arrival in the UK can be very overwhelming:

Ah something that was totally new to me when I came to the UK was the fact that I had to back up all of my arguments... so that I can make {them} valid... In the UK you

have to read the text, come up with the arguments and then back up those arguments and that was totally new to me (Female, Single, aged 30-39)

Nonetheless, they noted that this got better as they interacted in the system. This is as a result of the fact that they know adjusting to language is sine-qua-non to their academic success, hence they embraced the challenge with special commitment.

### **Integration**

The interactions of international students with other people in the UK came to the fore in the findings of this study from different dimensions. The first aspect relates to the fact that the respondents, feel that their relationships and the presence of their spouses with them in the country help them emotionally to deal with the stress and demands of their studies. On the other hand, they reiterate the fact that as children can be more demanding than spouses, coping with caring for them is a considerable point to note:

There are two ways. A husband makes it easier because of paying some rent and then some support as well, but when it comes to children it is quite difficult studying and taking care of children (Female, married, ged 40-49).

From a different perspective, the difficulty of having friends among British, indigenous students or those who are very familiar with the UK system was also mentioned. According to them, if they are simply in the UK to still make friends with people from their countries, there is far less interpersonal gain achieved in their period of study in the country. They believe that the value of their study in the UK will be significantly enhanced if they have British friends:

No, it was not easy. The first friends I had were international students as well, yes. Sometimes they (the British students) do not want to talk to you, looking at your accent, so you have to keep going (Female, divorced, aged 40-49)

It is noteworthy to state that those that have friends and relatives that are already in the country have a special opportunity to quickly adapt to the new cultural environment as they are able to get guidance and direction from them:

It is not very easy... But my landlady and landlord and the daughter are good, maybe because I have stayed a long time, almost four months. We see each other every day and communicate. When we know each other, it is easier to become friends (Female, Single, aged 18-29).

I have a lot of family here. They helped me quite a lot in the beginning... They helped me find my way around, told me how to travel, ...how to use the Tube maps. In my country, there is no Tube and no bus system like here, so it took me a couple of months to get to know it (Male, single, aged 18-29).

More often than not, participants use social relations as a coping strategy to deal with loneliness and other similar related challenges they are confronted with in acclimatising to the British cultural system where possible. Essentially, they approached those who have got experience of living in the UK for guidance. This includes exploring the developments in the digital world for this purpose such as the social media.

I think so, because the first day it was hard to come here for me, because I think, 'Yes, I know nobody,' but after just one or two weeks I met my friend and it is good. But

also I used a lot of blogs, online blogs. People shared their UK experience, and it made me less alone....That helps a lot (Male, single, 18-29).

### **Institutional support/mentorship**

Another noteworthy finding in the study is that the participants acknowledge that there are some institutional support programmes in place in their institution of study. Most of these are in the form of academic professional support offered by tutors. Besides, this also takes the form of personal tutorship through which personal issues of concerns of the students are addressed.

I think they [the university] helped me to be confident, because the teachers, the international office staff, helped me in every situation. I was sick, so my teacher helped me to go to a walk in centre. He...understood me, so these situations make my life easier (Female, single, aged 18-29).

Nevertheless, they pinpointed further areas where support in the system could be strengthened. They highlighted further need for support concerning life outside the university, and the mainstream British culture. According to them, this could be enhanced by incorporating current students into the support scheme. This could be identified as student-to-student (S2S) support. In other words, while the university staff members play their professional roles in the system, in the form of staff to student (T2S), there is still a great need to have students who are either British citizen or have lived in the country for a long time with considerable knowledge of the system/culture of the country, and those familiar with the international students' country of origin in the loop:

Sometimes I feel like they need to sit with international students, because we are from different countries, and obviously different systems in different countries. They should not think that we use the system back home. So sometimes I feel they should spend more time with international students...but sometimes I feel that they should ask, 'Are you familiar with the system? What do you use?' so that they can understand the gap or the lack I have, and how to help... (Male, single, aged 30-39).

Participants are of the opinion that in certain instances, they are more at ease when interacting with co-students than with university staff members. Hence, they believe a combination of (S2S) and (T2S) will deliver a more robust acculturation programme for the institutions.

### **Resources and Equipment**

The study also pinpoints the impact of the knowledge gap in the use of technology and resources on the experience of the international students. This is noted in terms of the highly sophisticated equipment and educational resources that are not available to the participants in their home cultural systems. In some cases, the respondents feel overwhelmed by these.

My background is I studied medicine, but there are so many things that I am using here for the first time. I work in a lab. I have to work in a laboratory here for my course, for my thesis, so there are so many instruments that are very new for me. I heard about them, but I know some instruments are very expensive. Back home we cannot provide them, so this is good learning for me. It is more practically based (Female, married, 40-49).

When I look at the UK system, and especially at (my institution), I would say there is access to the textbooks that you need. They are readily available, and especially

journals. I like the idea of having journals that I can turn to online in the UK system.

In a sense, personally, I find the UK system much easier, because you do not have to buy 20 textbooks (Male, single, aged 18-29).

However, this is viewed by the respondents from two contrasting perspectives. Positively, this approach gives them opportunity to learn various ways of doing things with very limited guidance which they believe is a great advantage for their future endeavours such as employability and by making them strongly competitive in the labour market. They stated further that such opportunities set them apart from their contemporaries who were not privileged to have overseas studies. On the other hand, it is stated that, not having adequate support in handling some of the new approaches to their academic programme can lead to embarrassment when the desired outcome is not achieved.

### **Government Policy**

Respondents stress the importance of government policy in their educational experience in the UK and specifically highlight the challenges associated with visa regulations. They feel that there is an inherent discrimination in the system. According to them, home students are favoured above them as international students in terms of policies associated with work and employment opportunities. They perceive that restriction on the type and extent of job opportunities available to international students is a form of inequality in the system:

I think also...as an international student, all you have is the internet. The internet is your book, is your information, your source. So I think they should be more explicit and say, especially to international students, that, 'If you get a visa it is hard to get a job'... The international office, because it is there specifically for the international

students, should help them to get jobs, or just circulate within the university, so that during the summer holidays they do not go out there to look for work, they work within the institution, so that they do not struggle so much (Male, single, aged 18-29).

They stated that there is a need for the government to look into addressing this to make the country more welcoming and accommodating to international students:

We are all human; international and UK students. ...If a UK student would be allowed to work more ... I think that same right should be given to international students. We all have equal rights, so I think that is an injustice, and that has to be dealt with (Female, single, aged 30-39).

### **Value of British Education**

Much as they have the highlighted challenges, these students still cherish the quality and value of the British education that they experience they believe that it gives them the opportunity to stand out compared to their counterparts who do not have the same opportunity to travel to the country to study. They believe this quality should be maintained to preserve the value:

The quality is good, and ....In a sense, I would still say it should not be watered down just because somebody is an international student. ... When you graduate, it puts you at a disadvantage because, if you are not pushed to the level of an Oxford student, with all the research that that student has done, yet you want to be at the same level when it comes to looking for work, it does not do justice for a student,... If anything, it should be made more reasonably challenging, so that there is a perception that we want these students to come out as experts in their field. ... and we want them to come out as

graduates who know what they are talking about in their field (Female, divorced, aged 50 and over).

## **DISCUSSION**

This study explores the acculturation of overseas students in the British Education system using a London-based institution as a contextual platform. The paper highlights areas of challenges faced by these students. While some of these relate directly to their studies, others centre on issues not directly related to it. So, they experience culture shock on a range of issues. The challenges range from weather condition, adjusting to new curriculum and pedagogy, discrimination, to managing social lives. This presents an interesting pattern of findings which supports the understanding that culture is a wide-ranging phenomenon that encapsulates numerous factors that define a particular society (Mühlbacher *et al.*, 2006). Besides, it is also consistent with previous findings such as Kelly and Morgan (2012) and Ragavan (2009) that report overseas students' culture shock in unfamiliar cultural terrain.

The significance of the students' interrelationship with others is well acknowledged. From one perspective, the huge positive impact of the support of their relationships with their spouses, friends and relatives, especially those who have considerable knowledge of the UK cultural system is well acknowledged. This also includes the support received through social media platforms. On the other hand, they stressed the difficulty in having British friends. The findings of Li (2012) also accord huge significance to the support provided by other people (who are volunteers) to help the overseas Chinese students in the country. Although there is a slight difference regarding the scope of support offered in the study of Li (2012) and the one in this present study, the point of convergence between them is that the social support provided

helps to solve the problem of culture shock and loneliness in a strange cultural environment to an extent.

The discrepancy between the curriculum and pedagogy of the UK and the participants' countries of origin occupy a centre part of this study. Although they acknowledge that there are some institutional supports in place in the university, these are not perceived as sufficiently hitting the target. As the literature suggests, institutional support frameworks appear to be in place in various HEI in different forms (Wilkins and Hulsman, 2011; Hsieh, 2012; Zarraonandia, *et al.*, 2013), but the extent to which these help address the overall acculturation challenge of overseas students remains a critical question. This study shows that while some issues are better handled through various institutional support systems in place in various HEIs, it appears these institutions could do better by incorporating students with considerable knowledge of local values into the overall acculturation schemes. This is because the participants acknowledge that students tend to be freer on some issues while discussing with other students than with tutors. Hence, while the introduction of International student tutor can help to an extent, the inclusion of students who have both the knowledge of the home country and host country cultural values of the students could help a great deal. In other words, the combination of staff to students (T2S) and student to student (S2S) can make formidable overseas students' acculturation groups, which could be termed Acculturation Focus (A-Focus) for each institution. This group could also be the reference point for all the various challenges these overseas students encounter. While the extant literature (Hsieh, 2012) has suggested cultural training to foster intercultural relationship, this present study confirms the potency of this stance. Nonetheless, it extends it further by specifically recommending the use of acculturation mentorship arrangement with a rich mix of people of various cultural roles in small groups to ease the overseas students into the new cultural system.

The participants pinpoint the discrimination they experience in the society in various forms with great emphasis on government policy in relation to visa and student-work regulations. This sounds like a bitter pill to swallow for these students. They simply view this as a form of discrimination against them as a group of people within the society. Although many studies in the literature also pinpoints discrimination experienced by overseas student in the UK as an issue (see for example, Archer and Francis, 2005; Krahe *et al.*, 2005; Warren, 2007); the direction of this discussion has not been so critically focused on government visa regulation as reported in this study. The scale of the disappointment could probably be attributed to high expectation of the international students in the UK business environment prior to their arrival in the country without properly exploring the associated limitations.

It is interesting to note the high value that the students attach to the UK education which they jealously cherish as what places them above their contemporaries in their home countries. This could probably be explained as what serves to counterbalance their emotional stress in the new cultural environment. It fits in the category of pull factors that attract overseas students to the UK as explained by Wilkins and Hulsman (2011).

### **IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY**

This study has huge theoretical and managerial implications. Theoretically, it updates the extant literature on education, international business, ethnic minority groups, and acculturation. While various studies have looked at specific groups of overseas students, and others have explored specific cross-cultural aspects of these students' experience, the diversity in the sample of this present study strengthens the existing postulations on this phenomenon. It shows

areas of common views among the students despite the differences in nationalities, and uses the convergence of their views to elucidate the lingering issues on their acculturation.

The paper also presents some interesting and noteworthy managerial implications. While there are many factors that constitute the Unique Selling Points (USP) for various HEI including wide range of courses, world class status, specific location, and many others, the attractiveness of specific institutions to overseas students could be significantly enhanced by the university programmes to aid successful easy acculturation in the UK. The use of Acculturation Focus (A-Focus) group and the specific selection of members of the team to allow for staff to students (T2S) and student-to-student (S2S) mentorship will be specifically beneficial. This will specifically help these students to overcome the culture shock they experience as identified in this study. Another key closely related implication of this study is the need to have in place, a significantly overhauled induction programme within which issues identified in this study including handling of equipment, students' personal challenges and social integration could be addressed *ab initio* before the full commencement of their studies in the institutions. While having induction programmes is ubiquitous in HEIs, the fact that respondents in this study highlight these issues suggests that more could still be done to reinvigorate the way it is being conducted. This could be in terms of embedding it into the curriculum in a seamless manner such that will have an enduring impact on the students' overall experience. This could constitute a strong USP for institutions as the UK educational environment becomes more competitive by the day.

Concerning employability, the implication of the study could be viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, a much more radical approach to securing and organising part-time employment opportunities for these students during their period of study such as forging strategic relationships with employers and organising various internship schemes could be

adopted. While issues about employability are being addressed to an extent in various institutions, perhaps being more proactive about these could be of help towards addressing this issue further. Eventually, this can also enhance the students' employability after graduation. Secondly, there is a need to manage the students' expectations concerning employment so that they are aware of the limit of the opportunities available to them within the scope of their status, before arriving in the UK. This could help to mitigate the feeling of disappointment associated with limited employment opportunities available to them in the country. Apart from the implications of the study for Higher Education Institutions, the finding of this study could also provide strategic directions to various government agencies, non-governmental organisations, and other stakeholders with interest in international students and their acculturation in different countries. For example, government policy on overseas students could be reviewed and possibly made more welcoming. This has potentially significant positive implications on the overall health of the nation's economy in such a way that will make the country a preferred destination for education among various other countries.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This paper explores the acculturation of overseas students in the UK. It uncovers a number of interrelated issues in this regards. They range from the challenges confronted by the students in the form of culture shock, interpersonal relationships, discrimination, institutional supports and other related factors. However, the study also shows that the students find succour in some social interactions they develop in the country and those with spouses, family members, and friends. The development in technology also opened a number of opportunities for them to interact with people who are familiar with the UK cultural systems on various social media platforms. Evidently, they noted that adding student-to-student (S2S) support to the existing institutional supports (T2S) will be a robust acculturation scheme that could ease students from different countries into the strange cultural terrain of study. Interestingly, and from a positive

note, their perception of the highly rated quality of the UK education system also reinforces their emotions to confront these noted challenges.

In view of its limitations, there is a promising avenue for future research in this study. It is recommended that the sample of the study be extended to various institutions and cities of the UK for a wider and deeper insight on this topic. This has the potential to enrich our knowledge further on the plight of overseas students in the UK cultural system and various coping mechanisms that could be adopted.

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