



[https://doi.org/10.31891/2308-4081/2021-11\(1\)-8](https://doi.org/10.31891/2308-4081/2021-11(1)-8)

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ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL ADAPTION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN CANADA

ABSTRACT

The study highlights three types of international students' adaptation: academic, social and cultural. The most typical challenges in each adaptation are identified and described. Academic challenges include lack of language proficiency, different education values, interaction with the university faculty, staff and mates. Social issues for international students are living on- or off-campus, initial difficulties, independence and loneliness, relationship with domestic students and involving them into university life. Culturally, international students face the following challenges: culture shock, the lack of culture wellness. Thus, as demonstrated in this study, having a better understanding of these students' challenges, university faculty and staff can recognize students' needs and effectively offer supportive services. The university needs to be prepared to meet students not only academically but also socially and culturally. This study also describes the priorities in Canadian international education strategy that makes Canada one of the world's top learning destinations. Federal and provincial governments Canada demonstrate their increasing interest in the global education market. It is reflected in the well-designed Canada's International Strategy for 2014–2019. According to it, there are three key objectives before Canadian educational system: to encourage Canadian students to gain new skills through using opportunities to study and work abroad in key global markets, especially Asia; to diversify the range of countries international students come from to Canada, as well as their fields, levels of study, and location of study within Canada; increase support for Canadian educational institutions to help grow their export services and explore new opportunities abroad.

Keywords: *international students' academic adaption, social adaption, cultural adaption, Canada.*



АНОТАЦІЯ

У статті висвітлено три типи адаптації іноземних студентів: академічну, соціальну та культурну. Виявлено та схарактеризовано найбільш типові проблеми кожного типу адаптації. Академічні проблеми охоплюють: відсутність володіння мовою, різні цінності освіти, взаємодію з викладачами університету, співробітниками та однокласниками. Соціальними проблемами для іноземних студентів є: проживання в університеті чи за його межами, початкові труднощі, незалежність та самотність, стосунки з вітчизняними студентами та залучення їх до університетського життя. У культурному плані іноземні студенти стикаються з такими проблемами: культурний шок, відсутність культурного самопочуття. Таким чином, як було показано в цьому дослідженні, краще розуміючи академічні проблеми цих студентів, викладачі та співробітники університету можуть визнати потреби студентів та запропонувати ефективні допоміжні послуги. Університет повинен бути готовим зустрічати студентів не лише в академічному, а й у соціальному та культурному плані. У цьому дослідженні також описуються пріоритети канадської міжнародної освітньої стратегії. Федеральні та провінційні уряди Канади демонструють зростаючий інтерес до світового ринку освіти. Це відображено в Міжнародній стратегії Канади на 2014–2019 роки. Згідно з нею, перед канадською освітньою системою постає три ключові цілі: заохотити канадських студентів здобувати нові навички, використовуючи можливості навчання та роботи за кордоном на ключових світових ринках, особливо в Азії; щоб урізноманітнити коло країн, з яких іноземні студенти приїжджають до Канади, а також їх галузі, рівні навчання та місце навчання в Канаді; збільшити підтримку канадських навчальних закладів, допомогти розширити свої експортні послуги та відкрити нові можливості за кордоном.

Ключові слова: академічна адаптація іноземних студентів, соціальна адаптація, культурна адаптація, Канада.

INTRODUCTION

Like other spheres of human activity, education is also increasingly becoming globalised. Canada is one of the countries that attracts international students as the place to get higher education. Every year educational institutions in Canada accept a great number of students from all over the world. It is proved by the results of the study held by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. OECD (2019) states that 21% of international higher school students in Canada are from other OECD countries, among them 32 % were from China, 16 % from India, 8 % from France, 4 % from the USA (OECD, 2019). The tendency of increasing a number of international higher school students is seen in other OECD countries, as well. Currently, international students are 11 % of all Bachelor Degree students, 16 % of Master Degree students and 33% of all PhD students. In OECD countries the share is 4 %, 13 % and 22 % accordingly. In contrast, only 3 % of Canadian higher school students were enrolled abroad. The share of higher school students from other countries (in the period of 2012–2017) increased by 5 % in Canada while in other OECD countries by only 1 % on average (Economic impact, 2017). Thus, the number of international students in Canadian colleges and universities is on the rise and the trend seems to continue according to annual statistics.

THE AIM OF THE STUDY

Considering the above-mentioned facts, international students, as a unique group on Canadian campuses, deserve our attention to investigate and understand their special



needs. In view of this, the purpose of the research is to explore international students' academic, social, and cultural adaption in Canada.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH METHODS

International students are very important to higher education system in any country, thanks to academic prestige and financial benefits. A group of researchers from colleges of Texas & AM University investigated the reasons of their importance in detail (Wu et al., 2015). Their scientific findings can be easily applied to Canadian higher education system. Students from other countries bring various advantages to those educational institutions in Canada that enroll them. Firstly, they increase the level of academic excellence of the colleges and universities because they are academically well-prepared. Secondly, these students catalyze academic competition thanks to bringing new divergent ways of thinking. Diplomas of Canadian colleges and universities which they receive are highly ranked in their home countries. Thirdly, international students are an important source of diversity in educational process and in everyday students' life. They bring in the cultural diversity due to their home culture and ethnic peculiarities. As a result, they help both their groupmates, roommates and teachers enrich their cultural background and skills in working with people of different ethnic origin. On the whole, international students can provide opportunities for the academic community to experience different languages, cultures, and traditions (Wu, et al, 2015).

At the same time, international students face various challenges on their way to get higher education outside their home countries. A great number of researchers investigated these problems trying to find the ways to minimize the mentioned hardships. It was found out that they happen due to the changes in physical, biological, cultural, social relationship, psychological (behavior and mental health status) domains. These comprise difficulties in acquiring language skills, adjusting to a new academic culture. In addition, they are misunderstandings and difficulties in communication with faculty and peers. Stress, anxiety, feelings of isolation and loneliness, social experiences, culture shock are other complications, to name a few. Besides, some tangible issues like lack of appropriate accommodation or any financial hardships, and in general, any adaption in their daily life (Berry, et al, 1987, Constantine, et al, 2005; Ozturgut and Murphy, 2009).

Moreover, the researchers designed various transactional models for universities and colleges that accept students from other countries. Canadian universities and colleges introduce these models and recommendations into their activity to help international students successfully cope with the transitional difficulties.

RESULTS

Academic adaption of international students in Canada

The academic setting can create a lot of challenges for international students. The greatest problem is considered to be a lack of language proficiency that hinders a smooth adjustment of international students. This issue was highlighted in a number of scientific publications. For instance, Liu (2011) used her own experience of an international student in Canada as an example. Particularly, Liu considered that her lack of English proficiency became a barrier for her successful participation in host community. She could not understand what her teachers and classmates were talking about in classes. In addition, she had difficulties in solving everyday problems, for example in asking for help: taking a correct bus or even shopping.

Another problem connected with a lack of language proficiency is the isolation from mates and pedagogical staff. An interesting study was performed by Terui (2011) who



applied ethnographic methods to examine six international students' hardships in interacting with native speakers. Findings from this study showed that due to their limited language proficiency, international students had to pretend to understand the conversation with native English speakers or between them.

Zhou, Zhang (2014) defined another challenge that is related to academic adaptation of international students – different education values. Some respondents noted that to get adjusted to the new educational environment was a real challenge for them because they used to have quite a different educational setting in their motherlands. One Bangladesh participant remarked that Canadian universities are concentrated more on knowledge application while at home theoretical knowledge was focused on. Another participant reported that in Turkey they had never written so many essays, especially for science or engineering courses. Some participants considered that a lot of group work was used at Canadian universities. It could pose challenges to students from other countries. For example, a Chinese student mentioned that when working together on a group project some group members did not want to talk to an international student. Hence, the international student cannot learn much from the project activity.

Typically, Canadian universities have special staff to assist international students to adapt to a new educational setting and its requirements. They involve academic advisors who advise international students on academic options and other available services to facilitate their transition; program chairs, admissions specialists, service specialists, instructors and others. In addition, every Canadian university where international students study, has the so-called International Students' Center (ISC). Their general goal is language immersion, cross cultural awareness, curriculum development, historical archiving, curatorship, teachers training, networking, multimedia technology, collection and archiving of oral histories (First Nations, 2019). International students feel free to use their services, particularly orientation programs for newcomers.

Social adaption of international students in Canada

In addition to academic challenges, very important for students from other countries are sociocultural difficulties. When they arrive to a host country, they face a lot of hardships and complications in their daily life, for example: the need to find a place where to live, a bank to deposit or withdraw money, where to apply for credits cards, an adequate transport either to find a necessary bus or possibly to buy a car to move around. The first lesson they have to deal with is to survive in a new community. That is why, they need to have a support system for the newly arrived (Wu et al., 2015).

In this respect, the most significant for university students is the adaptation in the first-year of study. Especially because the experience of the first-year has rather a strong impact on students' perseverance in post-secondary studies. Besides, the first-year experience is very important for every international student because they have to get accustomed to the new culture of the host community.

Considering the above-mentioned, our attention was drawn to the research by Zhou and Zhang (2014). Its main goal was to analyze the experiences of the international first-year of study students at a Canadian university. Necessary data were collected through surveys and focus groups. The focus group discussed the results of the study and revealed the most crucial items of the social integration of these category of students. Interestingly, they were: residence, relationship with domestic students, challenges and suggestions for service improvement. Many university students from other countries have Canadian friends but in most cases, they only work together with them on class projects. At the same time, at



their leisure time, international students socialize with friends from their home country or other newcomers. It is because they all have the feeling of missing home and the same goal – to fit in the host community. English language proficiency may also be considered a significant social factor that influences international students' contact with Canadian home students and hence, their socialization (Zhou and Zhang, 2014).

Culture adaption international students in Canada

In addition to academic and social challenges, this category of students often faces the difficulty of transitioning to the culture of their host community. In general, when people encounter unfamiliar surroundings and conditions, they have the feeling of disorientation. This is termed with the word “culture shock”. On their arrival to Canada, students from other countries cannot escape the cultural shock. People may experience it in a number of different ways. They may be unique to their situation, but almost everyone is said to be affected by it in one way or another.

Canadian university authorities deal not only with the issues of social and academic adaptation, but also address cultural wellness of their international students proactively. For example, Lethbridge College provides special student support program. A student from other country than Canada can speak to a counsellor online or over the phone, or make a personal appointment to cope with a culture shock (International Services).

The more international students familiarize themselves with the culture of their host community, the more likely they begin to understand the traditions and practices of Canada. Canadians represent a diverse ethnic group. It is difficult to describe all Canadians, as there are a lot of ethnicities with their authentic customs. Still, there are some common customs and values that Canadians share. It is easy to find this information as well as other material on social issues, geography and history of the host country, in many ways: on the internet, by reading travel books, communicating with locals, etc. In addition, some Canadian universities work out a list of recommendations how culture shock of international students should be dealt with. Moreover, to show a cultural diversity, Canadian universities and colleges focus international students' attention on the common cultural values of the Canadian people. They present this important information on their web-sites.

CONCLUSIONS

This research aimed at investigating social, academic, and cultural adaption of university students from other countries in Canada. The findings showed that this category of students encounters a lot of transitional difficulties when they come to study at universities and colleges in Canada. On the other hand, hardships, pressures and complications these students face, become real drivers to them. They motivate students from other countries to develop necessary skills to solve various problems. As autonomous learners, they develop new learning strategies to deal with difficulties in studying.

This study only focused on three types of international students' adaptation: social, academic, and cultural. Hence, its findings should be carefully interpreted. It is planned to check the findings of the study through further empirical research. Due to the time and word limit, there were not reported other important factors of international students' integration in Canadian community such as motivation, cultural background, personality, and their attitude to living and studying in Canada. In future these variables will be considered closely.

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