

## Adjustment problems of Iranian international students in Scotland

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“Please understand (with sincere heart) the need of the overseas students. The differences in culture and religion do not mean that we cannot stay and live together happily.” (Student comment, Rogers and Smith, 1992, p.7)

*Despite the important contribution of the adjustment of international students to successful academic performance in the host country, little research has been done in the United Kingdom. The aim of this study was to collect factual information about adjustment problems of Iranian international students in Scotland, such as psycho-social and cultural adjustment problems. The findings of this study underline the importance of sojourn's expectations in cross-cultural adjustment particularly in the case of migrants from developing countries to Western countries and also the role of religion in adjustment. On the other hand, this study questions the role of the acculturation particularly in the case of international students and adjustment. The study concludes by making a series of recommendations to agencies involved with international students. These include provision of more pre-arrival information, better accommodation, extensions of financial or employment support and improved support to the barriers of students.*

Adjustment, international students, Iranian students, family and social factors, Scotland

### BACKGROUND

International students have long been a subject for debate. It is supposed that overseas students mainly travel to the United Kingdom in order to take advantage of courses and special fields of study, which are not available in their own countries. Basically globalisation has transformed the national boundaries of the educational territory in the world.

International students have a significant presence in the higher education of the United Kingdom and continue to grow. According to statistics available from the Higher Education Students Agency (HESA), the total numbers of international students in the United Kingdom in the year 1994/95 was 163,713. The number increased to 221,606 in the year 2001/02. The total number of Iranian international students from 1994/95 to 2001/02 increased from 143 to 160 in Scotland. In addition, according to a report by the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education of Iran most Iranian international students now attend higher education in the United Kingdom.

International students, as long-stay tourists, have a significant injection into the United Kingdom economy due to the fact that they pay full tuition fees and also their expenditure on the United Kingdom-produced services and goods (Kelly et al., 2002). The total expenditure is “twice the

value of United Kingdom exports of coal, gas and electricity in the same year.” (McNamara and Harris, 1997, p. 2) In addition, non-economic benefits arise from overseas students such as English course and culture and understanding between races (McNamara and Harris, 1997). Despite the importance of the adjustment of international students for their academic success in the host country, little research has been done in the United Kingdom (Halamandaris, 1995; Maundeni, 2001). In contrast, the universities in the United States, Australia and Canada have undertaken most of the research on sojourner adjustment (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Ward and Searle, 1991; Halamandaris, 1995). Furthermore, none of the previous investigations in the United Kingdom have looked specifically at Iranian students and the adjustment process. Studies have concentrated more on general issues of migrant groups.

Any living in another country creates problems of adjustment to the host country for the migrant, and overseas students are not exempt from this process. Understanding of this process is very important to the success of this sojourner population. From the arrival of international students in the host country, they encounter many different and unexpected problems. Students may need to adjust to a new educational system, which differs considerably from the methods of study in their own country. There can be some difficulties in adjustment to British customs or in obtaining suitable accommodation and desired food, whether for religious or personal reasons. The host country may not provide sufficient support for the overseas students.

Recent research suggests that psycho-social adjustment is influenced by various cross-cultural variables, such as the amount of contact with host nationals, length of residence, finance, and accommodation. Furthermore, previous studies have suggested that the adjustment of international students differ according to the country of origin and country of study. In addition, a range of economic and psycho-social factors that affected adjustment has also been identified.

Although, previous studies have approached the study of adjustment through the measurement of one or a limited number of variables, this study seeks to investigate a range of variables that seem to affect the process of adjustment of international students.

## **METHODS OF RESEARCH**

The present study attempts to explore the experience and psycho-social and cultural adjustment concerns of a group of international students from Iran in the universities of Scotland. In order to achieve this, a cross-sectional study and semi-structured interviews were conducted. The method for this study was a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches for the purpose of providing meaningful and rich information and enhancing the validity of the overall analysis. In order to obtain clarity, applicability of the adjustment's measures, and understandability of questions, a pilot study was administrated. The sample was selected from Iranian students who were spending a length of time, ranging from six months to five years, at their place of study after which they intended to return home. This research did not include people who had grown up in the British culture and in the British academic system. The population for this research was all Iranian postgraduate international students in Scotland. At the time of distribution of the survey it was approximately 70 students. The selection of the sample was non-probability sampling because the research population could not be fully listed for sampling. Questionnaires were distributed by email to students on the Iranian Students Association email list in Scotland. The researcher was not able to access the mail address of students due to Data Protection Act but the Students Association was willing to forward questionnaires. At the time of distribution of the questionnaire most Iranian international students were attending the universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Forty-eight questionnaires were returned. This represents a response rate of 80 per cent, given the known numbers of students.

The interviews were conducted at times and locations depending on the respondents' preferences. The interviews were set up in the university of the respondents and ranged in length from 30 to 45 minutes. The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. The advantage of using a tape recorder is for preventing loss of vital data or recall error. Although all students in the sample were able to speak English, semi structured interviews were conducted in Persian by three students and in English by one of the students. The first step was for the researcher to assure the respondents that their name was not going to be disclosed under any circumstances. All names and any other identifying signs were removed from the interview material and all recording materials were stored in a place where only the researcher could access to them, and once the study was completed all identifying signs were destroyed.

The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for statistical analyses.

The students who participated in the study had the following characteristics: the majority of the students were male, PhD students, attending Glasgow University. Many of the students were in the second or third year of their study. Most of the students were studying in life sciences subjects. The majority of students were married, living with their family and had two children. A minority of students mentioned their spouses were also students. The majority of students were government funded; therefore, it was supposed they would be more likely to return to their home country. The age of most students tended to be older than their Scottish counterparts. The majority of students had lived in a large or capital city in Iran. Religion of all students was Islam.

## FINDINGS

The study examined the dynamic of the cross-cultural adjustment process, in particular, cultural, academic and material factors affecting the process. Findings of this study can be divided into three different sections: material, academic or cultural issues. Academic issues related mainly to relationships with supervisors and the independent or dependent methods of learning. Material issues included employment while studying, spouse's employment, pre-arrival information about material factors such as housing, and childcare facilities, length of the scholarship, health and medical treatment. Cultural issues were understood as the Scottish language or accent, participating in leisure and social activities and bringing up of children in a different culture.

### Material Issues

In terms of significance of the study the majority of the students face difficulties in employment issues while studying and this applies to their spouse as well.

Table 1 shows that of 32 of the respondents, the majority of students (81%) indicated that they had difficulty in finding a job while studying. As one of the students said:

Medical students are not allowed to do their main job regarding treating patients due to British legislation.

**Table 1. Difficulty in finding a job while studying**

Amount of difficulty	Frequency	Per cent
No difficulty	6	19
Difficulty	26	81
Total	32	100

In addition, the statistics in this study showed that 82 per cent of the respondents experience many problems finding a job for their spouse, which would help to overcome financial problems. Only 18 per cent of students said that they did not have any serious problems.

A student during interview described difficulties in terms of finding a job for students and also their spouses as follows:

Students and their family must keen to find a job. It is possible in some cities such as Manchester and not in another one like Glasgow. Having job apparently has no benefit on the study and may damage the improvement. All these come from not enough support from the sponsor.

They expressed concern and dissatisfaction about receiving pre-arrival information regarding such things as housing and medical treatment and also funding in relation to the length of scholarship.

Table 2 indicates the extent to which the students were satisfied with receiving adequate information about study and living in Scotland. A student in interview expressed:

University prospectus usually includes some general and positive information about the city, such as weather, tourist attraction, etc. They do not let student know about more realistic statistical information about difficulties, which exist in the city, in particular in more deprived areas, namely, crime, racist, drug, and so on.

**Table 2. Level of satisfaction with pre-arrival information about study and living in Scotland**

Options	Frequency	Per cent
Satisfaction	15	31
Dissatisfaction	33	69
Total	48	100

Table 3 indicates the extent of financial difficulties.

**Table 3. Difficulty in financial matters**

Level of difficulty	Frequency	Per cent
Not at all difficult	5	11
Occasionally difficult	22	48
Frequently difficult	9	20
Always difficult	10	21
Total	46	100

Table 3 shows that of the 46 respondents, the majority of the students (48%) said that they occasionally had financial difficulties. Forty-one per cent of the students said they frequently or always had difficulty in financial matters. In contrast, only 11 per cent of the students said that they did not have any problem. Housing difficulties, as shown in Table 4, exacerbated financial difficulties.

**Table 4. Difficulty in accommodation**

Level of difficulty	Frequency	Percent
Not at all difficult	11	23
Occasionally difficult	21	44
Frequently difficult	11	23
Always difficult	5	10
Total	48	100

Table 4 shows that many of the students (44%) indicated that they occasionally had difficulty in accommodation matters. Twenty-three per cent of the students said that they frequently had difficulty and, in contrast, the same percentage (23%) indicated that they do not have any difficulty. Ten per cent of the students said that always had difficulty.

Even those students who had been to the United Kingdom before experienced difficulties. A student from Edinburgh who has been sent to the United Kingdom by the Ministry of Petroleum to continue his education said:

As I have been in the United Kingdom before coming to Scotland, it was not too difficult to cope with the problems I had ... I mean, getting accommodation, registering my son, getting health care and so on. The only problem is that we have to

be a bit tough about expenditures here. We pay 55 per cent of our salary for rent and this makes life a bit tough. I am happy that I came here rather than London.

One other area where material issues arose was health and medical care. Sixty-one per cent of respondents said they were dissatisfied with the medical treatment they received.

### **Academic Issues**

Some students said they did not need to attend an English course for a variety of reason: previous study in the United Kingdom, having a high score in IELTS, or not much difficulty in English language generally. However, other students said language was a problem because of non attendance in an English course before coming to the United Kingdom, no time to get language skills because of paperwork and bureaucracy, or lack of availability of English courses.

The majority of the students indicated that they were satisfied regarding academic issues such as student experience, student advisory system, research facilities, relationship with supervisor or lecturer and also staff, university English course and university assessment system (see Table 5). However, they were often dissatisfied with the length of their scholarship.

**Table 5. Students satisfaction with aspects of academic life in Scotland**

Options	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Student experience	30	65	4	0
Student advisory system	7	60	16	18
Research facilities	27	60	10	2
Length of scholarship	2	27	47	29
Relationship with supervisor or lecturer	47	43	11	0
Relationship with other staff	17	73	10	0
University English course	8	50	30	13
University assessment	5	71	16	8
Ability to face up to problems	13	87	0	0
Life in general at the present	2	94	4	0

In relation to other academic problems, analysis of the data showed that the majority of students had no difficulty in using computer or administrative matters in the university. Further, they evaluated their relationship with their supervisor and lecturer as 'good' but most of the students occasionally had difficulty adjusting to the British methods of study and coping with the pressure to perform well.

### **Cultural Issues**

It can be seen in Table 6 that the least cultural problems appeared to be on issues like finding food items they were used to, understanding cultural differences and using TV and radio. The greatest cultural problems for the students were bringing up children in a different culture and also participation in social or leisure activities. Although the research sample showed that they understood and appreciated cultural differences between home and host country, they felt sometimes there is misunderstandings about their culture from their host country. Their main concerns are about bringing up their children according to Iranian culture or perhaps according to Islamic religion, values and norms.

**Table 6. Degree of cultural difficulties**

Cultural problems	Level of difficulty (%)			
	No at all	Occasionally	Frequently	Always
Upbringing children	13	32	34	21
Understanding cultural differences	23	62	15	0
Using TV and radio	31	33	27	9
Participating in social or leisure activities	17	29	27	27
Finding food items they are used to	54	35	9	2

One of the students, for example, explained the reason for non-referral to consulting services as follows:

Although there exist some centres in the universities and in the city to help students with their problems, as I have found, their services are mostly theoretical (in a non-academic phrase 'lip service') instead of some practical ways.

Findings indicated that students rely more on spiritual support than practical support. In addition, the students recognised the main person who could help them in solving the problems, in terms of helpfulness from one to four respectively, was their partner, friends, supervisor, and sponsor.

Finally, despite identifying problems according to available data from the survey, 71 per cent of the students said they would advise friends and their relatives to come to Scotland for the purpose of their studies for the following reasons: enjoy staying here, research and skills can be achieved better here, language is English, a new experience, for making scientific relationships, the variety of students from different cultures and religions.

## DISCUSSION

The degree of difficulty in adjustment varied from student to student. The factors such as academic, psycho-social and cultural problems can affect a students' adjustment in Scotland. These factors impact independently or in conjunction with others and influence student adjustment in a new environment.

According to one model, adjustment is defined as a process relating to interaction between the personal characteristics of the students together with the structure of the host community (Sadrossadat, 1995). In other words, the greater the similarity between characteristics of students and the host community, the easier the interaction. Acculturation, satisfaction and also achieving the expectations of the host country enhance student's scores in adjustment. Van Rooijen (1986) pointed out that adjustment related positively with satisfaction and negatively to report some symptoms of stress. As a result, well-adjusted students seem to be less likely to feel helpless and more able to make satisfactory social contacts. The present study confirms these issues but also finds that material factors are significant. In this study, when students find themselves in the situation, where they are dissatisfied with the length of their scholarship and have difficulty in some unexpected costs like childcare and housing and medical treatment, they do not adjust to the host country easily.

Most of the students had difficulty in finding a job for their spouse and themselves to help them maintain a healthy financial status. The spouses had worked full or part time in their home country but in Scotland they are unable to work in their area of expertise. Consequently, previously working spouses moving to Scotland lose professional identity and also the advantages of a double income, and suffer greater financial restrictions and instability. This problem is concomitant with the restrictions that the students have in finding a job at the time that the students start writing up and usually scholarship money is running out. The study reported here also found difficulties like adjustment to British methods of study are more difficult than language because the students moved from a dependent learning system to an independent-self motivated system. It would appear that structured assistance needs to be given to students in making the transition to the British system successfully.

Another area of concern for international students is the communication issue. Host language proficiency is generally considered an important variable in determining successful cross-cultural adjustment. Many previous empirical studies like that of Ward and Kennedy (1999) support this view that higher language skills tend to be equated with greater adjustment. This is because many

scholars believe that host language competence is at the centre of the acculturation process (Verthelyi, 1995). In fact, successful communication is necessary to feelings of psychological well-being and satisfaction with life. On the other hand, in a study of Iranians in Southern California, Barati-Marnani (1981) indicated that variables such as English proficiency and length of stay had no positive correlation with level of cultural assimilation. Furthermore, as Kegan and Cohen (1990) pointed out, the single factor that contributed to both personal and social adjustment and cultural adjustment is speaking English at home. In this study statistics show that the majority of students speak English at home rarely or never. Therefore, the students do not make acculturation to host country in the easy way.

Although it is accepted that there are greater cultural differences involved when speaking of developing countries and the students sometimes find themselves going through a period of cultural shock, the statistics in this study illustrate that the students clearly understand cultural differences. Pearson-Evans (2000) in a study of Irish students in Japan contended:

linguistic skills posed one level of difficulty, but interpreting non-verbal behaviour and the underlying communication rules, based on cultural values and cultural 'logic', were the most challenging problems they faced (p: 244).

The importance of family and children in their value system in Iran proves to be the most significant aspects of diversity and a key factor in the amount of the culture shock experienced. Findings of this study support the views of Verthelyi (1995) and also of Maundeni (2001) who found that several wives accompanied their husbands because it helps them feel more secure and better. However, as the students in this sample showed, the majority have difficulty in bringing up children here. This finding is supported by many researchers, such as Lipson (1992) and Chachian (1997). In their study of first generation Iranian immigrants in the state of Iowa, they found that:

The majority of parents raised their children (or intend to do so in the future) based on Iranian cultural values, but they also realise that to maintain ethnic purity in a multiethnic society is impractical, if not impossible. ( Chachian, 1997, p. 624)

Similarly, in a research on Iranian immigrants in the United States, Lipson (1992 p. 16) found that a source of concern was "how their children were absorbing American norms and values."

In relation to the influence of religion in this study, it had a positive influence on the students. It was a source of spiritual support and helps students overcome adjustment problems and be able to tolerate their situation better.

While the characteristics of host country like religion and language are different from the home country of the students, acculturation and therefore adjustment to the host country is very slow and not simple. Although there is some consensus about the city and also the university as a welcoming multicultural environment (due to the presence of a large number of ethnic and religion backgrounds), 85 per cent of the students indicate that they are satisfied with facilities available to them for participation in religion or beliefs in Scotland.

Other aspects of the sojourn are judged as more positive or negative because the students view themselves through a complex comparative lens, which includes past experiences, present circumstances, and future expectations.

Many of the students have little chance of becoming familiar with the host country before departure. They did not have full departmental and institutional induction. The author's observation is that disliking living conditions in the host country may be dependent on the previous conditions in the home country where home is seen by the students as better and desirable. It should be mentioned that the majority of my sample were lecturers in universities in Iran before coming to Scotland. They were living in good welfare conditions or perhaps, in the

case of privately funded students, from reasonably wealthy families and perhaps from the middle or upper classes of society of Iran. Furthermore, expectations about western countries based on information from past graduates often clash with the realities experienced on arrival with high expectations.

In summary, the findings of this study underline the importance of the sojourners' expectations of cross-cultural adjustment particularly in the case of migrants from developing countries to western countries and also the role of religion in adjustment. On the other hand, this study questions the role of acculturation, particularly in the case of international students and adjustment.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **To Universities**

While universities cannot plan to overcome all problems and protect students from them, they can establish ways, either formal or informal, to make this transition easier. Chan and Drover (1997) suggested mechanisms:

to sensitise local students and staff to the significance of cultural differences, to encourage intercultural communication, to promote participation at different levels of institutional decision-making, and to foster a sense of belonging. (Chan and Drover (1997, p. 59)

Specific recommendations derived from this study to universities include the following statement:

- Send more detailed pre-arrival information for the students about childcare facilities, housing opportunities, ethnic minority communities' activities, and financial considerations. Universities should try to develop a more realistic picture of students' expectations about university life and overall try to facilitate better planning about their sojourn experiences.
- Offer multicultural training workshops to those who come into contact with international students to be more aware of intercultural and intracultural diversity and adjustment process and for more effectiveness in working with them.
- Awareness about dependent and independent learning methods should be encouraged. Provide friendly atmosphere in the university and encourage home students to have more interaction with international students. The Students Union can help in this matter and bring students together regularly. This strategy can have two benefits: first, home students become more aware of different cultures and, second, international students can improve their use of the English language.
- It is important for supervisors to be aware that because of limitations of time of scholarship they should assist the students in the best ways they can. As Brown and Atkins (1988, p. 129) argued "supervising overseas students may require more time, effort and skill than supervising home British students."
- Providing assistance to international students requires taking into account cultural and religious restrictions, particularly in providing social and official receptions and leisure activities in the university to suit all students' needs with different backgrounds. An institution receiving international students should take overall responsibility for the well being of their students during their stay in Scotland. Providing university accommodation at a reasonable cost, especially for married students with families would help overseas students overcome the problems of isolation and homesickness. Universities should be sensitive to the needs of female students in providing low cost childcare facilities inside the university. Universities



should provide students with opportunities for temporary' employment to overcome their financial difficulties.

### **To Embassy and Sponsors**

- Decrease bureaucracy and making arrangements for English course before sending students abroad to ensure that their English skills are adequate for studying in the United Kingdom. In the case of students studying in Scotland, this should ensure that they are familiar with the Scottish accent before leaving for the host country. It is appropriate that beside using tape and video, using some Virtual Learning Environments (VLE) like Video Conferencing and Distance Learning is recommended. They can arrange some meetings specially with supervisor to be more familiar with language, accent and a research project before coming here.
- Provide the students with an information package would lessen students' frustrations and save valuable time. Services should be more sensitive to students' welfare particularly length of scholarship, which creates financial problems. It is perhaps the main source of stress for students.

### **To Other Public Institutions**

Public institutions should be more aware of the needs of international students and try to take more practical approaches to the students' welfare and for reducing possible signs of adjustment problems. This would involve the following:

- Introduce international students to the public as contributors for increasing the economy of the United Kingdom and also as the best source of understanding between different nations and cultures by mass media for preventing the making of judgments in public as asylum seekers and discrimination against them.
- Housing departments try to allocate a better place in the city to international students in order to make them to feel more secure during their stay in the United Kingdom.
- Education departments should be more aware of cultural differences. They should consider in their curriculum programs these differences to reduce parents' worries about bringing up their children in a different culture, and by providing childcare facilities at a reasonable price for the students.
- Health departments should try to improve their consideration of the health and medical treatments of international students.

Finally, as Okorocho (1997, p. 289) pointed out:

they should ensure that departments and institutions are seen to be giving overseas students value for money. This satisfies the overseas students and pays dividends in the long run because a satisfied customer is the best possible marketing agents for acquiring new students."

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