

How do international students adjust in a new cultural environment? A qualitative study of international students' experiences in two Asian universities

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Abstract

Research on international students' study experiences has placed a strong emphasis on host countries in Western contexts. This study responded to a need for qualitative research on international student experiences of their new cultural environment in the Asian context. Drawing on the U-curve model and psychological contract, this study investigated the challenges and coping of international master's degree students at two universities in Taiwan. We addressed two research questions: How do international students studying in Taiwan reflect on their experiences of the U-curve process? How do international students studying in Taiwan explain the role of the psychological contract in their experiences of the U-curve process? Our results aligned with the U-curve theory, that students encounter distinct stages during cultural adjustment. There was some evidence that showed a new stage, pre-arrival stage, can be a critical stage in the cultural adjustment process.

Keywords: psychological contract, U-curve model, cultural adjustment, higher education, learning environment

Introduction

Research has shown that in the United States, compared to domestic students, international students show lower levels of adjustment up to three months into their first semester (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). Studies have confirmed that international students face difficulties with adjustment, however, they often focus on international students living in Western countries such as the United States and United Kingdom (Hirai et al, 2015; Shu et al., 2020; Wang et al, 2012). Emerging literature has shifted focus to international students in Asia as Asian countries are playing an increasing role as host universities (Lee et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2010) and has been dubbed the new hub for international students (Nguyen et al., 2020). That is, higher education institutions in Asian countries have gradually growing international degree students. Though the literature is in its nascent stages, Cao & Meng (2021) review of thirty-three (33) articles on international student adjustment in China revealed that thirty-three (33%) of these studies were not grounded in theory. Furthermore, Cao & Meng (2021) also noted that these articles focused on resources rather than demands or barriers of adjustment.

This brings to the fore, what are the main challenges faced by international students in Asia and how do students cope? Taiwan is steadily increasing its global reach through its New Southbound policy, which focuses on enhancing human capital through education (Nguyen et al., 2020). To this end, literature from Taiwan can add to the existing literature on international student experiences in Asia. Taiwan offers attractive scholarships that invite international students from Asia and Western countries. To accommodate the internationalization of higher education, Taiwan adopts English as a medium of instruction (Suprpto et al., 2019) and many universities adopt a bi-lingual policy having separate classes for Chinese and English speakers. Furthermore, Taiwan has become well-known for Mandarin studies which also attract foreign language students (Roberts et al., 2010).

Various factors affect adjustment and strain among international students: self-efficacy (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002), having host nationals as friends (Shu et al., 2020), participation in leisure activities (Gomez et al., 2014), student-university alignment (Bui et al., 2020), acculturation motivation (Dentakos et al., 2016), academic pressure, financial stress, homesickness, perceived discrimination, social disconnectedness, and culture shock (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). Based on their systematic review, Cao & Meng (2021) proposed a model of cultural adjustment that highlights various predictors of international

students' adjustment in new cultural environments. The model includes four dimensions of cultural adjustment: a. general; adapting to new living conditions b. socio-cultural; acquiring socially appropriate skills c. psychological; mental well-being d. academic; managing academic demands. Which will be supplemented by the u-curve theory and Janssen's (1995) model of intercultural interaction.

Furthermore, Cao & Meng (2021) called for future research to qualitatively explore this topic by exploring perceptions of Western and Asian international students. Our study aims to fill this gap by: (1) providing a deeper understanding of international student's adjustment in Taiwan (2) explore the u-curve theory and identify the factors that contribute to feelings of mastery. The U-curve theory has long been challenged (Anderson, 1994; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Furnham & Bochner, 1986) with scholars noting that student adjustment is a complex process that is experienced differently by each student (Chien, 2016). Nevertheless, there are aspects of the U-curve that explain cross-cultural adjustment and it is important to go beyond criticizing this theory and examine what aspects hold true and how it can be improved, expanded or adjusted to modern day adjustment experiences (3) utilize Janssen's (1995) adjustment strategies to underscore the student experience. This model goes beyond the student's current experience in a new culture and simultaneously considers the student's ties to their culture of origin. The interaction between both old and new cultures is an important consideration for understanding student adjustment.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Literature Review

U-curve theory

Lysgaard (1955) introduced a U-shaped pattern of adjustment, formally known as the U-curve hypothesis, consisting of four main stages which explain how travellers adjust to their new environment. 1. Honeymoon- "individuals are fascinated by the new culture and are excited about all the new and interesting sights and sounds" 2. Culture shock- "a period of disillusionment and frustration as the individual must seriously cope with living in the new culture on a day-to-day basis" 3. Adjustment- "gradual adaptation to the new culture and learning how to behave appropriately according to the cultural norms of the host country" 4.

Mastery- “small incremental increases in the individual's ability to function effectively in the new culture” (Black & Mendenhall, 1991, p.226).

Though several quantitative studies have found support for the U-curve process (Chang, 1973; Golden, 1973; Surdam& Collins,1984), there are statistical and methodological difficulties that hinder the reliability and comparability across studies (Ward, 1988; Black & Mendenhall; 1991). Furthermore, Chien (2016) concluded that the international student experience is convoluted and cannot be condensed into a facile process such as the u-curve. Chien (2016) interviewed twenty-six (26) postgraduate international students in the United Kingdom and found that only four (4) students’ experience correlated with the u-curve process across academic, socio-cultural and overall adjustment. Interestingly, the majority of the participants in this study graphically depicted their academic and overall adjustment as a fluctuating process that is constantly going up and down.

Similarly, several studies have challenged the notion of the initial state of euphoria in the honeymoon stage. Brown & Holloway (2008) found that the honeymoon stage was not solely characterized by positive feelings (i.e. enthusiasm) but included negative feelings such as anxiety, nervousness and stress. Likewise, Hirai et al (2015) also found that the majority of international students experienced poor psychological health at the start of the semester. Other researchers have argued that students do not experience the extreme culture shock but instead encounter “manageable obstacles and challenges that can be overcome...” within a few days (Viol & Kasen, 2021, p.21). In general, there seem to be questions surrounding the order of the stages in the u-curve. Taken together, the criticisms suggest that the stages may occur as a continuum rather than discrete phases. However, this paper does not aim to prove or disprove the u-curve, simply to examine its manifestation.

International students’ reactions to new environment

Janssen’s (1995) model of intercultural interaction describes the ways in which people adapt to their new environment. The model consists of two dimensions (maintenance of one's own cultural identity and contact with second culture) which is further divided into four (4) categories. (1) assimilation- rejecting one’s own culture to adopt a new culture. (2) segregation- rejecting the new culture and embracing one’s own culture. (3) marginalization- a sense of estrangement from both one’s own and new culture. (4) integration- incorporating or balancing the various aspects of both one’s own and new culture. The level of adjustment in a foreign country depends on the length of time, motivation to integrate and cultural

distance (Janssen,1995). The longer foreigners are in a new environment, the more experience they garner, becoming more knowledgeable and increasing their network. On the other hand, foreigners may not be motivated to integrate if they are overwhelmed by other priorities such as academic performance. Furthermore, if the new culture is similar to one's own culture there is less effort and motivation to integrate; Janssen (1995) noted that in such instances, there is little uncertainty or newness, hence, foreigners are more likely to depend on their home country's social network.

International Students' Psychological Contract

A psychological contract is an exchange agreement between an individual and an organization (Rousseau, 1995). There exists a common understanding that binds the parties involved to a particular course of action (Rousseau, 2001). Investigations into student perceptions of psychological contract have revealed expectations of the academic staff and university. Students expect access to university facilities and competent teachers, in exchange for their tuition fees, attendance, class participation (Bordia et al., 2019; Koskina, 2013). Roberts et al (2010) examined pull factors for Taiwan as a host destination and found that the availability of established and highly recognized Mandarin language programs, safety and security, word of mouth recommendations and Taiwan government sponsored scholarships were key factors for international students. As such, psychological contracts may be relational i.e. implicit expectations of social-emotional exchange amongst people (Herrera & De Las Heras-Rosas, 2021) or transactional i.e. more formal and focus on explicit materialistic or economic expectations (Aggarwal & Bhargava, 2010) of the university; based on what was promised when students accepted the admissions offer.

Psychological contract breach occurs when the individual perceives the other party not to have fulfilled its obligations (Rousseau, 1995). Breach may be a result of real or perceived slight that another party has failed to deliver on a promise or obligation (Robinson & Wolfe Morrison, 2000). When universities fail to meet student expectations and fulfil promises associated with the psychological contract, this results in contract breach. Bordia et al (2015) noted that contract breach leads to negative affective, attitudinal, and behavioural outcomes. The intensity of these outcomes varies, depending on the significance of expectations and promises to each individual student. Emotional responses include disappointment or frustration and may even be as severe as depression or feelings of betrayal and distrust. According to Bordia et al (2015) attitudinal and behavioural responses may

result in “absenteeism, lower motivation to learn, lower performance, decision to leave before degree completion... negative word-of-mouth recommendation...” (p. 22).

International students’ experience in Taiwan

A plethora of quantitative studies have investigated international student experiences in China (Cao & Meng, 2021), however, research on international student adjustment in Taiwan is developing. Notably, a few studies have examined the international student experience in Taiwan. Research has noted that international students experience neo-racism or discrimination (Lan, 2018), difficulty with language and communication (Lau & Lin, 2017), poor academic adjustment (Hsu et al., 2021) and a general feeling that integration into Taiwanese society was a “rarity” (Manning et al., 2019). On the other hand, international students’ social adaptability and the friendly nature of Taiwanese have been reported as important resources in successful adjustment (Lewis et al, 2013; Hsu et al., 2021). Nevertheless, research on the international student experience in Taiwan is limited with only a few studies investigating both Asian and non-Asian international students (Ma, 2014). Based on the above literature, the present study addresses the following research questions:

1. How do international students studying in Taiwan reflect on their experiences of the U-curve process?
2. How do international students studying in Taiwan explain the role of the psychological contract in their experiences of the U-curve process?

Methodology

Sample

International students were recruited from two public universities in Taiwan. These students were degree-students, pursuing master’s degrees in business and management. Though Chinese is the main language of instruction, business programs offer English speaking degrees that attract many international students. Hence, this population was selected since English is the mode of instruction for researchers. Participants were 12 international students from Europe (58%, n=7), U.S. (8%, n=1) and East Asia (33%, n=4). Participant ages ranged from 21 to 35 years. Women represented 50% (n = 6) of the sample. Participants had

resided in Taiwan for a minimum of 7 months and a maximum of 60 months, did not speak Chinese (67%) and English was not their first language (83%).

Procedure

Based on interaction with international students and previous research, interview questions were formulated. After which, a series of pilot interviews were conducted to refine the interview questions. After questions were revised, participants were recruited. Data collection occurred during the start of the second semester in January 2023. Participants were recruited via purposive sampling, in which researchers sought students who had been living in Taiwan for at least six months and could provide details about their adjustment experiences. Participants were invited during a school event held for management students. The researcher gave brief information about the study and interested persons volunteered with their contact information and an interview time was set.

Prior to the interviews, a happiness diagram was sent to the participants to collect information about their general feelings while studying in Taiwan. The diagram was divided into six semesters. The students then use curves to represent their happiness levels (see Figure 1). The instruction was deliberately kept short, so that the participants may reflect on their experiences. We obtained demographics from the participants on the interview day (see Table 1). Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

The analytical approach taken in this study most closely resembled a process of Thematic Analysis as described in Braun and Clarke (2006). This can be defined as a method for ‘identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and themes considered important in relation to the overall research question’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). In order to analyse students’ experiences, we developed a coding system based on the adjustment process, psychological contract and U-curve model (Cao & Meng, 2021; Lysgaard, 1955; Rousseau, 1995, 2001). We initially drafted sets of codes following the theories found in the literature. Both authors discussed the draft codes and produced a revised set of codes. In order to organize the extracts and deconstruct the transcripts for further analysis while staying true to the study's objectives, the first set of codes was used. During this recursive process, we conducted back and forth coding and re-coding by constantly re-evaluating extracts. To enhance validity, both

authors coded individually and discussed these codes in a few meetings to ensure the interpretation of participants' feelings and stories were consistent.

Findings

Pre-arrival Stage

The U-curve has four main stages: 1. Honeymoon stage; characterized by excitement 2. Culture shock; frustration with reality of new environment 3. Adjustment; learning appropriate behaviours of the new environment 4. Mastery; effective adaptation. Notably, our investigations have highlighted the emergence of a new stage, which we term the Pre-arrival stage. The pre-arrival stage is the period before the individual arrives to the host country. This includes various aspects of preparation to relocate, such as securing appropriate travel documents, conducting research about the host country/institution, resigning jobs and other responsibilities. The pre-arrival stage was described as one of the most stressful stages and was significantly complicated by historical/environmental events (i.e., the COVID-19 pandemic).

“It was very complicated, there were a lot of things you needed to settle down, especially now, during the covid period, there was a lot of things even the school didn't know what to do...”
(Student E)

“I already knew that I was accepted to Taiwan but I didn't know if I would be able to go because of the COVID and even the embassy recommended us to wait on the next school year and I would still get the scholarship. So I know some people gave up on this {the hope of coming to Taiwan}.” (Student E)

Arrival

Notably, stresses in the pre-arrival stage significantly impacted students' feelings upon arrival. The uncertainty associated with pre-arrival seemingly heightened positive feelings related to overcoming obstacles. As several interviewees noted:

“I was very happy to arrive, finally. There's the quarantine stuff but after trying to get here for a year and a half and then the last four months of uncertainty and then it looks like it went down, the probability of coming here, so I was so happy to be here.” (Student E)

“I was very happy. I was finally here you know. After all the stress of the visa and everything I was like yes!” (Student G)

Nevertheless, COVID-19 negatively impacted initial adjustment, as quarantine interfered with socialization. For example, students joined their classes late which meant their classmates had already bonded and as such some students found it difficult to make friends. Furthermore, to combat the spike in COVID-19 numbers, there was a temporary switch to virtual classes which also negatively impacted socialization. Some students even noted that this lack of socialization brought on feelings of loneliness. As several interviewees noted:

“I couldn’t meet my classmates... eventually met them randomly in another class in the middle of the semester and I found it hard to interact when some of them are already little bit close to each other.” *(Student A)*

“But there was a time when there was no school, only online classes, this was also stressful. Because I was at home, everything was closed, there was nothing much to do, I was really most of the time just sitting at home and the room is so little, so it was just uncomfortable.” *(Student E)*

“I went through a lot of ups and downs because of COVID...I feel like it kind of put a damper on being able to socialize, like really getting to meet my classmates in the first semester.” *(Student F)*

Reaction to New Environment

We found evidence of integration and segregation but lack of support for assimilation and marginalization. These students managed to embrace the new culture, while not forgetting their own culture. In doing so, they were able to appreciate the social and cultural differences they encountered in Taiwan. For example, differences about the food, culture, transportation, people and communication. As several interviewees noted:

“The Taiwanese are more dependent on family, whereas in Czech everyone is more independent or individualistic.” *(Student E)*

“I think people are always very nice and generous and that’s something I’m not really used to in France. People {in France} are indifferent, they will just ignore you. I think for negative way {shock} not really.” *(Student G)*

“Everything is cultural differences (laugh)! The food, well I think the people, the people are friendlier I would say as in they are willing to help I find um and there is also the very indirect culture so if something is bothering us or we have a problem or an issue something we’ll say it to the person but over here I notice it doesn’t work like that (laugh) because

people are still very nice to you even though they are bothered. So it's more indirect here which need to adapt to if you're not used to I would say." (*Student C*)

"Of course, I did comparison... like here life is a little bit different because here everything is more convenient than my country so and there is um more resources for people in daily life like simple things like city bike you can travel around the city very convenient to use and it's not available in my city but I think it isn't even available in my country... The convenience stores are all over the places, you can get food and small things like basics anytime anywhere so it's not available in my country most of the shops close at 10 or 11pm the latest." (*Student B*)

Interestingly, some students also noted the impact they had on local students. A process known as mutual acculturation, which considers the changes the host country/native group makes to accommodate foreigners (Sidler et al., 2021). One interviewee noted:

"They are more outgoing, I feel that this has changed a lot because before they would focus on studies only... I think it is because of the foreigners as well because they [local students] see that there is a different way of socializing and we always try to make them more outgoing even during the presentations." (*Student E*)

Culture Shock and Adjustment Challenges

General Adjustment

General adjustment refers to cross-cultural adjustment predicted by specific demographic, personal and contextual resources (Cao & Meng, 2021). The most salient challenges centred on housing conditions, quarantine, food and weather. During border control, the Center for Disease Control announced all arrivals from abroad were required to quarantine for 14-day and undergo a 7-day period of self-initiated prevention.

As several interviewees noted:

"Quarantine was very bad... the room, it was super small, there was only a bed and then you have to squeeze into the bathroom and there was no window, the first 5 mins I got like a little panic attack because I thought, how can I be here for 14 days..." (*Student E*)

"I did the 7-day self-management in the dorm E which is completely empty like a horror house. The bathroom is super dirty, the dormitory is bunkbed and each room sleeps 4 people, and they give us completely random roommates for 1 week... Even now when I think about it I feel like thank god it is over because it was very stressful." (*Student A*)

Academic Adjustment

Academic adjustment refers to managing academic demands and includes university fit, supervisor fit, academic satisfaction and Chinese language proficiency (Cao & Meng, 2021). In this study, the most salient challenges centred on collaborative learning, academic standards, teaching and learning methods. This is consistent with Wen et al's (2018) finding that English taught international students in China experienced poor academic satisfaction due to faculty's poor English proficiency and prioritizing research over teaching. As several interviewees noted:

"...Taiwanese students are quite reserved, they don't like to ask questions in class. I once asked them "why none of you ask questions in class?" It makes me feel like I am the trouble maker because I'm constantly asking questions. They say "I'm afraid I'll look stupid", or they're afraid that they'll offend the teacher. That was a bit of shock for me." (*Student L*)

"Teamwork, mh-hm{no} I am not this kind of guy, I got use to work individually. It was a surprise for me that we need to do so many presentations. In Russia we need to do everything individually and we need just to write. It's really rare when you need to go and speak, and here the most works are built on presentations, it was like wow and also teamwork, you need to share your thoughts with someone else and sometimes people they don't understand why are you saying this or that, so it was hard to explain and hard to do teamwork because people want different things and it was difficult to come up with something in common." (*Student H*)

"Sometimes the grades are a little bit unfair, it seems everybody is excellent, everybody gets A or A+. I don't know what to think about it because on one hand I like it because it means everybody gets good grades, on the other hand there is no difference between people who are not trying at all and people who are trying. Especially, first semester it felt very weird, and sometimes the professors don't even tell you why, they just give you the grades without even explaining so that's also difficult." (*Student E*)

Some students reported support from academic staff that significantly aided their adjustment. Supervisor support was an important social support that contributed to greater understanding of the Taiwanese environment and academic performance.

"As advisor, I feel they are really supportive. Sometimes we have thesis discussion. Sometimes we have dinner or lunch. Sometimes he invites us to his house, to understand more about Taiwanese culture. He told us about life in Taiwan." (*Student I*)

Psychological Adjustment

Psychological adjustment refers to the mental well-being of students and includes stress (Cao & Meng, 2021). The most salient challenges centred on loneliness, anxiety and depression. Threats to psychological health seemingly occurred mostly in the first semester, when students first start the adjustment process. During this period, they struggle to form relationships and have limited support in the host country. Several interviewees noted:

“The biggest problem was loneliness in the beginning. I called home, chatting with my friends at home.” (*Student E*)

“I felt it, in the first semester, like stress and anxiety as well as depression but now its ok.” (*Student H*)

“I think probably in the first semester I had some kind of depression because it was hard for me to be open enough. I was just sitting at home, I was trying but still comparing to right now, I understand that probably it was depression. I was sad, I didn’t want to go out, I was closed and I didn’t express myself enough.” (*Student H*)

Social Adjustment

Social adjustment refers to acquiring socially appropriate skills and includes social connectedness and social relationships (Cao & Meng, 2021). According to Ward et al (2001) where there is significant difference between home and host culture, there is greater likelihood of socio-cultural difficulties. In this study, the most salient challenges centred on English language proficiency, communication differences, cultural differences, friendship and prejudice. Students struggled to cope with the communication style, way of thinking/culture and workaholic nature of Taiwanese. This applied to both classmates and lecturers i.e., difficulty with communication style affected social and academic relationships such as classroom discussions and forming friendships. As several interviewees noted:

“There is one thing that seems very strange to me which is the communication. My Taiwanese friends described it as the politeness in Taiwanese ways. Like, they don’t say straight yes or no...but in my culture we are direct. Sometimes I get confused by Taiwanese’ answers. This is the only problem I have with the culture differences. For example, if I asked someone to go for lunch and the person would say “maybe tomorrow?” I know it is a “no,”

but I don't get why people won't just say no. Come on! It is mainly the communication style that still confuses me sometimes." (*Student A*)

"Also I think there is a working culture in Taiwan in general, they don't know how to go out, chill and relax, they just work and study...they didn't like to hang out at all... if I invite them to go to the beach or something they didn't want to go...The people just don't want to do anything other than school, it was very difficult to ask them out to do something else." (*Student E*)

"I will try to know Taiwanese, but until now, I know only a few people, and we don't have really deep communication." (*Student L*)

"...I didn't expect to get local friends right away. I expect it to be hard. But I didn't expect it's this hard." (*Student J*)

Interestingly, some international students found it easier to make friends with Taiwanese students who had experience of travelling abroad, as they found them to be more open minded and receptive to socializing. Some students also highlighted how to circumvent communication challenges.

"...I think that as a foreigner that doesn't speak any Chinese at all I think it's ok. And also with the phone, you can translate everything, so that's also a huge advantage." (*Student G*)

"The friends from Taiwan that I have, they are open enough because they have abroad experience, they have studied in the USA, some of them studied in the UK, so maybe that's why they got used to this...I know how to communicate with them, they know how to communicate with me and that's fine. But there are some Taiwanese that are not open enough and I don't know how to communicate with them." (*Student H*)

"...I think the Taiwanese I know are very open to the outside. I think they have a curiosity for international and for others in general that is maybe different from Taiwanese who've studied with only Taiwanese people." (*Student D*)

Moreover, international students with English as a second language struggled to adjust academically because they were stressed about their English level, these concerns were exacerbated by their poor Chinese aptitude. Several non-English native students noted:

“I can’t say which one was the most problematic to me, it was the same I think, language, communication, friendships and social activities. It was on the same level for me, because as I told you before, my Chinese was zero, my English was not that good and it hard for me to make friends in the first semester and that’s why it was a bit stressful.” (*Student H*)

“There were native speakers in my team and I felt a little bit ashamed or something on my English because it’s a lot lower than some of the students.” (*Student B*)

Some students reported prejudice which made it difficult for them to carry out daily activities and acquire accommodations outside of school dormitories. Several interviewees noted:

“When I went to buy milk tea, at the time speaking English, the impression was not so friendly to me, so I was a little disappointed. I asked what’s wrong and he [the shop owner] said nothing, but he used the eye-rolling...even though he knows how to speak English.” (*Student L*)

“Some other international students also found when they speak English, people are not very welcoming to them...” (*Student L*)

“To communicate with Taiwanese... it’s very difficult because they don’t want to rent to a foreigner, I’ve been trying but usually they say they can’t. I think it’s because they are prejudiced about foreigners.” (*Student A*)

Another student highlighted the difference in reception from locals when they speak English compared to speaking Chinese.

“They [locals] actually welcome you better when you try to speak Chinese...they smile more, they’re more friendly and more excited...when they see the foreigners, they just freeze and feel stressed because they didn’t know English, they didn’t know how to communicate, they don’t know what to do, so they get frustrated and do things slower...” (*Student D*)

Mastery

Time

Time was referenced as an important factor to achieving mastery, indicating it is a continuous process that increases over a period. Some students reported mastery in several

areas: daily activities, food and friendships but noted issues with the environment and cultural knowledge.

“I feel like the longer I’m in Taiwan, the more I like it here, settling in and enjoying it.”
(*Student F*)

“I mean, yea. I don’t know, I was just like hi guys I’m from France, I want to learn everything about your country and your culture so just talk to me. Asking a lot of questions I think to everyone in general.” (*Student G*)

“I felt it, in the first semester, like stress and anxiety as well as depression but now its ok. Time help me also.” (*Student H*)

“Think more than half a year, I was trying to get use to the environment here, to people, to food, everything, that I live in another country, that my family is far away from me, that I have no close friends here that I had in Russia, because you need time to make friends.”
(*Student H*)

Coping

Overall, students utilized both active and passive forms of coping to adjust and potentially gain mastery of their host environment. Many participants in our study cited social support as an important factor for coping. Regarding socio-cultural coping, social activities, social network, local friends and technology were found to be most critical. For academic coping, consultation with lecturers and supervisor fit were most important. Finally, social support and hobbies were essential for psychological coping. As several interviewees noted:

“Sometimes I complain it to my parents... I have a big social support from my family and my friends.” (*Student A*)

“The gym has been a great opportunity to meet locals and foreigners... It’s like half Taiwanese, half foreigners. I think it’s pretty healthy for me, a community type environment. It’s good to feel welcomed or like a part of something...” (*Student F*)

“Well I’m really going out quiet much (laugh) like going to bar, just meeting people basically. That’s why I love living here, to talk with locals like Taiwanese people and I think that’s the best way to... to understand the culture and adapting yourself to the culture just to embrace it basically, just meeting the people and asking sometimes questions...” (*Student D*)

“I don’t really talk about myself that much. Especially about emotional stuff.” (*Student J*)

“I usually watch Tv, go to the beach or go travel.” (*Student K*)

Psychological contract formation

Students formed their expectations from several sources: previous experience via exchange period or travels to other Asian countries, personal communication with the university, media and social networks. There were expectations about Taiwan, culture, relationships, program and teachers. As some students had transactional psychological contract (i.e. scholarships), they had specific codes of conduct related to academic performance they had to follow. Some students had to revise their expectations once they realized their expectations were different from the academic realities. Furthermore, some students did not do adequate research on their prospective university and therefore had no concrete expectations of the program or university before arrival. They merely trusted their home university to partner with a good school for the academic exchange program. As several interviewees noted:

“...because our program, the scholarship with the bank, we are separated from normal route students. We cannot have our own choices to enrol in classes. They have like fixed classes that we have to join.” (*Student J*)

“... I didn’t set expectations because I haven’t been abroad university so I didn’t know what to expect from studying at the university. I was more curious about how is it going to be... so I didn’t really research much.” (*Student B*)

“I really thought it was gonna be more like travelling and enjoying Taiwan but because most of my classmates are very serious about studying there was a lot of homework to do so it kind of change me, but in a good way.” (*Student E*)

Contract breaches and consequences

Some students were dissatisfied with the course offerings, teaching methods and the general classroom management of professors. Most students were surprised by the many class assignments, group presentations and grading process. Students who felt their expectations were not met, were not afraid to make formal complaints. However, they were left disappointed when their complaints were not addressed. As several interviewees noted:

“you are not expected to have debate in class. I have some classes where I kind of didn’t agree with what the teacher was saying and like can’t we have another view or something, and the teacher was like...but the way I’m showing you, that’s the only way...here it’s like yea whatever, just go with the teacher’s slide and I was like ok, no real discussion... I still participate the same but just I would not voice when I have another point of view. When the teacher ask question I will answer, but I will not ask questions myself to the teacher, except if I don’t understand that point.” *(Student G)*

“In general everybody gets a good grade and they [professors] don’t even explain why. Like one time I was working in a team , we worked quite hard, some of my teammates got A+, some of my teammates get A- and we are from the same team, so we don’t know what’s wrong. We ask in emails and the professor doesn’t reply back, so sometimes we don’t know what we did wrong. Its not about being difficult, but sometimes I did something wrong and I need to know what, so I don’t do it next time.” *(Student A)*

“I think that’s the biggest challenge, and also the motivation, when you see the grades you wonder why you should try hard... So we have to motivate each other in the group, just by trying hard, the grades doesn’t matter, we have to do well, we practice for our own [benefit].” *(Student A)*

Host university’s support

Pre-departure preparation was especially concerning to international students who often needed guidance with visa application, scholarship application and information on academic programs. In this regard, the international student office was essential, providing an orientation about policies, culture and campus facilities. Furthermore, having competent personnel along with academic and emotional support were cited as important factors for student satisfaction.

“Offices and departments they did a great job to support me, so idk what they can do to improve... I remember how they helped me with all the documents...” *(Student H)*

“I think here they communicate pretty well. When you send an email you will get a response very quickly.” *(Student D)*

“I think if I needed something, the university is always willing to help, we use facebook, we don’t use emails most of the time to communicate with the office, so they just reply very quickly.” *(Student A)*

University facilities such as the library, gym and pool were also crucial. Interestingly, the students reported the least satisfaction with campus dormitory, as there were no single room options. All dormitories required each student to have a minimum of one and a maximum of three roommates.

“We have a lot, in Russia we don’t have nothing, but here we have tennis court, basketball court, swimming pool, gym, everything, nice.” *(Student H)*

“...It’s actually beyond my expectations. Because there’s so many facilities...There’s many area for you to go for a walk and relax and also some exercising and activities.” *(Student J)*

“I lived in the dorm for 1 month and I run away, it was a very weird experience.” *(Student A)*

“The only stress I have is the dormitory. It was not to my expectation. Not the state I thought it would be...Maybe because it’s a bit old.” *(Student I)*

In contrast to the complaints about teaching methods and classroom management, many international students noted that outside the classroom, professors were approachable and supportive.

“I think the distance between professors and students here in Taiwan is closer than in Korea.” *(Student J)*

“I’ve joined parties that my supervisor held for us. He gathered all students under his supervision at his house.” *(Student K)*

“Sometimes we have thesis discussion, sometimes we have dinner or lunch, sometimes he invites us to his house to understand more about Taiwanese culture.” *(Student L)*

On the other hand, students highlighted several areas for improvement such as: student advocacy, cultural exposure activities, clear graduation requirements, academic grading transparency, and support from peers. Furthermore, students highlighted inadequate information related to general procedures and inadequate processes or student representatives to voice their complaints.

“In general, everybody gets a good grade and they {professors} don’t even explain why. Like one time I was working in a team, we worked quite hard, some of my teammates got A+, some of my teammates get A- and we are from the same team, so we don’t know what’s wrong. We ask in emails and the professor doesn’t reply back, so sometimes we don’t know what we did wrong. It’s not about being difficult, but sometimes I did something wrong and I need to know what, so I don’t do it next time, so the grading is kind of weird.” (*Student E*)

“Most of us are very disappointed at the courses sadly...Another point is that we have very little contacts with the second-year students because there was not even opportunity for us to bond.” (*Student A*)

“I hope they can provide us with more activity to get to know each other.” (*Student I*)

Though universities try to address the issue of socialization with their ‘buddy program’, a program that pairs international students with a local student who acts as an informal guide, international students noted inadequacies with this arrangement.

“The program is alright, but the problem is they [university] didn’t provide benefits for the buddy, so they[buddy] doesn’t put much effort in it.” (*Student J*)

“Some of my friends, their buddy just sent a email, a greeting email and doesn’t reply to further messages.” (*Student J*)

“It’s not very effective, if you and your buddy doesn’t have something in common, it will just die out.” (*Student I*)

Another main point of concern is career planning. While to universities host career fairs and other activities, these events are not fruitful for international students who often have difficulty finding placements due to their poor Chinese proficiency. As one student noted:

“One of the challenge is getting an internship at a company...for foreigners it’s very difficult to get an internship here.” (*Student I*)

Discussion

Drawing on the U-curve model, Janssen’s framework of intercultural adjustment and psychological contract, this study investigated the challenges and coping of international master’s degree students at two universities in Taiwan. The interview process has identified

several factors that influence international student adjustment. For general adjustment housing conditions, quarantine, food and weather were major factors. Academic adjustment included concerns over collaborative learning, academic standards, teaching and learning methods. While psychological adjustment focused on loneliness, anxiety and depression. Finally, sociocultural adjustment included issues surrounding English language proficiency, communication differences, cultural differences, friendship and prejudice. These issues are now discussed to gain insight on our research questions.

How do international students studying in Taiwan reflect on their experiences of the U-curve process?

Though we cannot say the order in which the stages occur, our results are consistent with the various phases of the U-curve theory of adjustment. Interestingly, several students identified the pre-arrival phase—a stage that the u-curve does not account for—as being crucial to their adjustment process. This was due to the pandemic, which made things harder for overseas students as they adjusted to life in Taiwan. The pandemic heightened international students' negative emotions before arriving in the host country. Particularly, the COVID-19 pandemic-related decisions and regulations created uncertainty and concern, which increased stress and caused some students to become so overwhelmed that their plans to relocate were completely derailed.

Moreover, in the absence of major historical or environmental events, the pre-arrival stage includes preparations such as documents, medical check-ups, accommodations, travel and communication with the host university. All of which seem to heighten anxiety or stress. However, the stress can be partially alleviated if there is consistent and timely communication with the host university. Students highlighted how effective communication with their host university reassured them prior to their arrival. Whereas ineffective communication characterized by unanswered questions and late responses were seen as incompetent and did little to quell worries.

Nevertheless, students reported relief and happiness upon arrival to Taiwan, as they overcame obstacles that had the potential to foil their relocation. This coincides with the initial positive feelings purported by the 'honeymoon' phase of the u-curve theory (Lysgaard, 1955). Students were positively and pleasantly surprised by the friendly nature of the Taiwanese people and the convenience of access to amenities. This is consistent with reports from (Lewis et al., 2013) who also highlighted the friendliness and receptiveness of Taiwanese to foreigners. Notably, this period of happiness was short-lived as many students

became unhappy due to the strict quarantine requirements, with some students even reporting intense sadness. Additionally, the quarantine period impeded social bonding causing international students to join classes weeks after initial introductions occurred and friendships had already been forged, which contributed to feelings of loneliness.

Regarding culture shock, there was a consensus of initial shock surrounding housing conditions and teaching and learning methods. Many students expressed shock at the size and discomfort of living quarters. This was exacerbated by quarantine requirements which restricted movement. Many students reported disillusionment regarding the non-interactive teaching style with limited discussions or debates. This is consistent with reports from Hsu et al (2021) who noted European students felt overwhelmed by the emphasis placed on hard-copied reports/assignments and oral presentations in Taiwan universities.

Students used strategies of integration and segregation to adjust to their new environment. Integration resulted in favourable adjustment, while segregation led to unsatisfactory adjustment. In relation to integration, these students were successful in striking a balance between their new and native cultures. These students were content with their newfound independence as they were living alone for the first time. Students who have travelled or lived independently in the past also found it easier to adapt to their new surroundings. They managed to embrace the new culture, while not forgetting their own culture. In doing so, they were able to appreciate the social and cultural differences they encountered in Taiwan. For example, differences about the food, culture, transportation, people and communication. Furthermore, these students successfully forged meaningful connections with academic advisors and local people. They immersed themselves in cultural exchange and leveraged tools (e.g. google translate) to bridge linguistic gaps living in Taiwan. These students demonstrated openness to experience that contributed to a positive experience living in Taiwan. This is consistent with reports that highlight cultural intelligence as a key factor in successful adjustment (Hu et al., 2020).

On the other hand, those who identified strongly with their own culture felt less like they belonged and had high sentiments of loneliness and homesickness and utilized segregation strategies. These students would conclude that their newly developed relationships were inferior to those from back home. They also maintained strong ties with friends back home and had a short-term mentality towards Taiwan. Having a demanding work schedule made matters worse and prevented sociability. These students experienced difficulty striking a balance between their new and native cultures. They had immense difficulty adjusting to the non-verbal/high context communication style and perceived it as deceptive and rejected this

aspect of the new culture. This negatively affected their ability to form local friendships. They instead made friends with foreigners who were like minded. Furthermore, this type of student was more likely to make friends with locals, only if they considered them to be open minded and culturally exposed. This is consistent with reports that international students are more likely to socialize with their compatriots than local students (Wen et al., 2018).

Many participants in our study mentioned time and social support as important factors for coping and developing mastery. This is consistent with Chan et al's (2021) assertion that support from lecturers and host country nationals are important for international student adjustment. Ma (2014) noted that many international students in Taiwan are more likely to study and live separately from local students. This is a barrier to student mobility (Manning et al., 2019) as international students are unable to become influential members of the student body, hold leadership positions or participate in campus activities, reducing their likelihood of achieving mastery of their new environment. Furthermore, the reference of time shows that mastery is not easily achieved. Like personal growth and development, mastery occurs through overcoming challenges and increasing knowledge and experience over a prolonged period. Nevertheless, students who had adequate support from their new environment felt they significantly improved in their ability to effectively function in their new environment over time.

How do international students studying in Taiwan explain the role of the psychological contract in their experiences of the U-curve process?

In relation to the psychological contract, there was evidence of both transactional and relational contracts which set the tone for academic and social expectations. Students with transactional contracts obtained academic scholarships and in exchange were obligated to adhere to university standards (e.g. above average academic performance). Students' transactional contracts focused on expectations of the academic and administrative staff (i.e. clear communication and academic guidance) and campus facilities. Comparatively, Koskina (2013) also found that students had expectations of the academic staff and campus facilities. Koskina (2013) found that students expected lecturers to be: "punctual...supportive and able to build self-esteem.

Lecturers were also expected to demonstrate excellent knowledge in a way that students understand, and appreciate how students from diverse cultural, educational and work backgrounds learn" (p. 1029). Understanding cultural diversity is especially important for a

diverse classroom. As international students have different learning styles compared to local Taiwanese students. Many international students wanted more classroom discussions or debates to foster meaningful information exchange and felt it was unacceptable to challenge or question the lecturer's viewpoints. However, there was adequate practice of teamwork and presentation skills.

Relational contracts proved to be more convoluted and focused on expectations of Taiwanese people, classmates and professors. Regarding social activities, students were dissatisfied with the opportunities to form connections and recommended that university offices should be more proactive and advertise social services to international students who are unfamiliar with such services. Notably, many Taiwanese universities have several programs such as 'buddy programs', 'host family' programs that give international students the opportunity to pair up with a local student or interact with a local family. However, some international students noted inconsistencies with their 'buddy' who did not maintain regular contact. Furthermore, some students were unaware of these arrangements all together. Therefore, it is important for host universities to have support staff that are knowledgeable about these procedures and market these programs effectively. Similarly, Koskina (2013) noted that students expected to "make new friends, have new experiences' (e.g. field trips, placements, organisational visits, meet and learn from people from different cultural and work backgrounds)..." (p.1032).

In some instances, student expectations were breached due to communication issues, and limited English course offerings. This led to feelings of anger, disappointment, demotivation and general dissatisfaction. Some students banded together to make formal complaints of their issues. However, they were left disappointed when their complaints and communications were overlooked. Taiwan is traditionally a high power distance society (Brice, 2012) that generally accepts an unequal distribution of power between authority and non-authority figures (Hofstede, 1984). High power distance organizations prefer centralized control, display fixed behaviour patterns and resist change (Chen, 2022). This has been shown to decrease the likelihood that persons in non-authority positions will speak up in Taiwan (Hsuing & Tsai, 2017). Moreover, in high power distance societies there is a belief that one should not question or challenge managerial decisions because leadership should be respected (Hsuing & Tsai, 2017). However, international students may not have similar views

about sharing their grouses. Therefore, when students' concerns are overlooked or mishandled, their overall perception of the program and university tends to be negative.

Conclusion

While pursuing a degree overseas, international students encounter social, academic, and psychological challenges. Consistent patterns that fit the U-curve model were discovered in the current paper, with the addition of a new stage; pre-arrival stage. The preparation process for relocating to a foreign country seems to have a significant impact on initial feelings about the host country. Furthermore, pre-arrival communications with the host university contribute to students' psychological contract formation and what students expect from the university. Future studies may consider in-depth factors that form the pre-arrival stage and its relation to stress and anxiety. Furthermore, coping with uncertainty during the pre-arrival stage may also be interesting, as some potential students may renege on their offer if they are overwhelmed during the pre-arrival stage. Future studies may also consider the difference between Asian and non-Asian international students. Cao & Meng (2021) meta-analysis on international student adjustment in China revealed that despite the significant cultural differences between China and Western countries, compared to non-western international students, Western international students seemingly experienced less acculturative stress throughout their adjustment process in China. Therefore, researchers may investigate possible differences in adjustment between Asian and non-Asian international students.

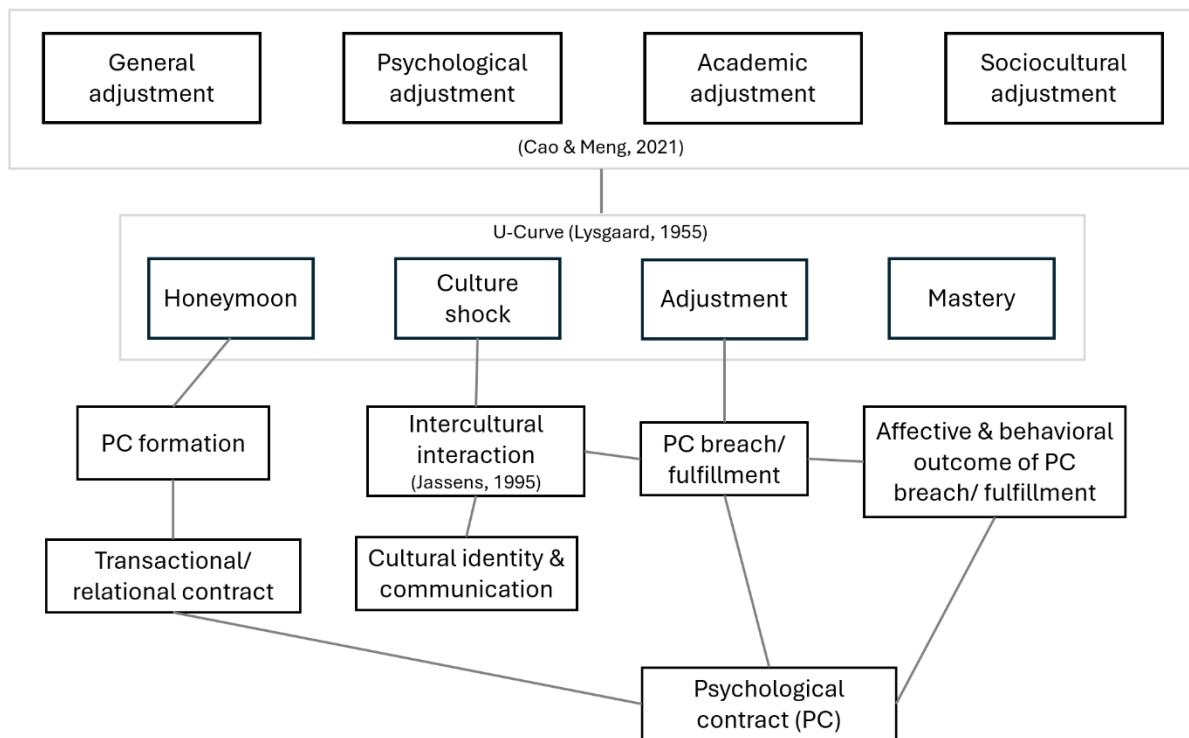
A limitation of our study is the confounding effect of COVID-19. It is difficult to determine how much COVID-19 impacted feelings of excitement and happiness in the arrival stage. Students reported initial happiness which was interrupted by an unusual social restriction i.e. quarantine. Therefore, it is possible that positive feelings could last longer. Nevertheless, the findings of our study have supported application of the u-curve model and supported previous findings from other studies. Moreover, this study has contributed to the extension of a framework that may prompt research into this new stage. Finally, universities and other important stakeholders should consider all stages of the adjustment model to foster a positive educational and living experience for international students.

Appendix

Table 1. Participants demographics

Interviewee identification	Gender	Nationality	Language (Mandarin)	Native English speaker	Length of Stay in Taiwan	Individualism	Power Distance
A	F	Czech	No	No	24 months	58	57
B	F	Belarus	No	No	60 months	25	95
C	F	The Netherlands	No	No	7 months	80	38
D	M	France	No	No	7 months	71	68
E	M	Czech	Yes	No	18 months	58	57
F	M	USA	Yes	Yes	13 months	91	40
G	F	France	No	No	7 months	71	68
H	F	Russia	No	No	36 months	39	93
I	M	Singapore	Yes	Yes	17 months	20	74
J	M	South Korea	No	No	15 months	18	60
K	M	Thailand	No	No	16 months	20	64
L	F	Cambodia	No	No	7 months	N/A	N/A

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of student adjustment



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