

Exploring Emotional and Cultural Intelligence of Undergraduate International Students at an Indonesian Private University

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ARTICLE INFORMATION

Publication information

Research article

HOW TO CITE

Tiara-Silalahi, A., Wulandari, R., Akbar, M.F.R., & Kristopo, H. (2022). Exploring Emotional and Cultural Intelligence of Undergraduate International Students at an Indonesian Private University. *Journal of International Conference Proceedings*, 5(5), 12-21.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.32535/jicp.v5i5.2003>

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Received: 23 October 2022

Accepted: 3 November 2022

Published: 24 December 2022

ABSTRACT

By using a phenomenological approach, this study explored the role of emotional and cultural intelligence in the adjustment process of international students. The study engaged 11 participants recruited through purposive sampling. The study employed focused group discussion for the data collection method. The questions were designed to help understand the challenges of adjustment and how emotional and cultural intelligence were exercised to counter those challenges. Findings showed that emotional and cultural intelligence was paramount in enabling international students to be socially integrated. This study aims to offer a greater understanding of the social adjustment challenges of international students while contributing to the existing knowledge and suggesting future research directions.

Keywords: Adjustment, Cultural Intelligence, Emotional Intelligence, International Students.

INTRODUCTION

Globalization creates mobility and open access to information, travel opportunities, and business growth and expansion. In 2018, OECD recorded that approximately 5 million international students are spread worldwide, with around 3.896 international students enrolled in various universities in Indonesia based on the data from the Ministry of Education in 2021 (Purwadi, 2022). With the increased mobilization, international students are bound to experience exposure to different cultures and challenges when immersing themselves in them (Peterson, 2004). Since social immersion offers challenges to emotional and cultural intelligence required to adjust, it is imperative for international students to develop and be equipped with social skills that allow them to interact with other fellow students positively.

Previous studies have shown that cultural and emotional challenges are contributing factors that influence the academic performance of international students. Emphasized as well by Li, Chen, and Duanmu (2010), who stated that social integration involving the university system, emotional support, and psychological health were identified as affecting students' success in universities to some extent. In terms of immersion, previous studies suggest that how a student interacts with peers contributes to the integration process (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Ward & Kennedy, 1993). Furthermore, correlations were revealed that interaction with other students promotes satisfaction (Perrucci & Hu, 1995), eases adaptation to life in a foreign country (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991; Zimmerman, 1995), and academic success (Pruitt, 1978).

Transitioning from familiar to unfamiliar settings requires emotional and cultural intelligence because it focuses on the individual's ability to think and adapt (Thompson, Ellis, & Wildavsky, 2018). To minimize tensions and uncertainty caused by cultural differences, people must develop cross-cultural competency skills to build interconnections with people who are different from them. Earley and Ang introduced the construct of cultural intelligence (CQ) in their 2003 book (Earley & Ang, 2003) to explain that cultural intelligence seeks to demonstrate the effectiveness of an individual's ability and skills in cross-cultural interactions and situations (Eisenberg et al., 2013). Cultural Intelligence refers to the ability to process communications, make decisions, and function effectively in adjusting to new environments. CQ consists of four components: Meta-cognitive CQ, Cognitive CQ, Motivational CQ, and Behavioral CQ (Earley & Ang, 2003; Lin, Chen, & Song, 2012). These four components of CQ should be emphasized simultaneously for an individual to adjust to an unfamiliar cultural setting effectively (Earley & Ang, 2003; Earley & Mosakowski, 2004; Lin et al., 2012). On the other hand, poor adjustment can result in psychological stress and poor performance (Cohen, 1980; Tung, 1988). Appropriate support of emotional expression is needed to reduce the stress and poor adaptation of the expatriates in a cross-cultural setting. A supportive environment, such as getting along with the locals, will help the expatriates learn about culturally accepted norms and behaviors (Kim, Kirkman, & Chen, 2006). The ability to accurately observe one's emotional changes and reactions of others is called emotional intelligence (EQ), and it is the most important for survival (Salovey & Mayer, 1990). EQ is not only associated with interpersonal and social skills but also affects all levels and aspects of people's lives. It is the key to successful adaptation in work and other domains in one's adaptation process. As previous studies have emphasized contributing factors to international students' adjustment to the new culture and required skills, this study specifically aimed to explore undergraduate international students' social immersion in their acculturation process at an Indonesian private university and how cultural and emotional intelligence role used to cope with those challenges.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many factors affect an international student's chances of adjusting well academically and socially (Rivas, Hale, & Burke, 2019). The extent to which international students can socially and culturally adapt to a new environment depends on several factors, including culture and customs of their home country, ability to learn host language, the length of their stay in the host culture (Wilton & Constantine, 2003), their interpersonal skills, and the frequency with which they interact with host country (Constantine, Wilton, & Caldwell, 2003). Aside from those mentioned above, two other significant factors contributable to the ability of international students to be socially immersed in their new surroundings are emotional intelligence and cultural intelligence (Thompson, 2018).

Emotional Intelligence

Mohyi (2020) states that emotional intelligence is highly beneficial for employee. Emotional Intelligence (EQ) can be understood as a subset of human intelligence that, when combined with innate and learned cognitive abilities, determines people's capacity for optimal adaptation to their environment through the inspired management of emotions, feelings, and interpersonal relationship (Goleman, 2012; Salovey, Brackett, & Mayer, 2004). A wide array of research has been conducted to study EQ and proven that the notion has an immense impact on the social aspect of a human being; social relationship (Wei, Lin, Jiang, & Zhou, 2021), mental health (Wagner & Martin, 2012), career (Marengo, Chinyamurindi, & Mjoli, 2018), business (Greenockle, 2010), and education (Parker, Saklofske, Wood, & Collin, 2008). According to Daniel Goleman (2012), the foundation of healthy social relationships is emotional coordination. Furthermore, he maintained that when an individual has a high level of EQ, the likelihood to self-motivate and be resilient while encountering failure, as well as be able to regulate his emotions, delay gratification, and govern their mental state well, could not be more obvious (Goleman, 2012; May & Carter, 2012).

Development of Emotional Intelligence

Yoo, Matsumoto, and LeRoux (2006) stated that an increasing number of studies had been undertaken in recent years to determine the role that EQ plays in a person's ability to adapt to and succeed in various settings. In addition, Khan, Wang, Malik, & Ganiyu (2020) expressed that much research has been done on the link between EQ and several aspects of life, including work, school, health, and adjustment. Chen, Lin, & Tu (2006) found that emotional intelligence is positively associated with life adjustment, while Engelberg and Sjöberg (2004) revealed that it positively correlates with interactive behavior. Furthermore, Adeyemo (2005); Sparkman (2008); Gabel, Dolan, and Cerdin (2005) mentioned that the notion is linked positively with achievement in education, psychological well-being, and social immersion. Thus, though the concept of EQ as a field of scientific research is relatively new, its popularity has continued to pique the interest of the scientific and public communities to this day.

Cultural Intelligence

Cultural Intelligence (CQ) concept is one of the latest contributions to intelligence along with emotional, social, and interpersonal that developed as a multidimensional construct. CQ explains the ability of individuals to navigate cross-cultural complexities beyond stable individual differences beyond cognitive elements. In their book, Earley & Ang (2003) stated that cultural intelligence (CQ) is a multidimensional construct that integrates several existing concepts and frameworks revolving around an individual's ability to skillfully manage interactions with others in cross-cultural settings (Eisenberg et al., 2013). This multidimensional construct originated from Stenberg's (1986) framework, where he proposed multiple loci of intelligence (Idrus, 2021), followed by the four

dimensions of CQ by Earley and Ang (2003). Moreover, Ang et al. (2007) elaborate on the concept of CQ, which focuses on an individual's capabilities to grasp, reason, and behave effectively in a cross-cultural setting. CQ consists of four dimensions: metacognition, cognition, motivation, and behavioral. The first three are seen as mental capabilities in the internal affective and cognitive systems (Eisenberg et al., 2013), and the last is considered the overt action domain. According to Earley and Ang (2003), individuals can only be considered culturally intelligent when they can simultaneously engage all four dimensions (Thompson, 2018). Metacognitive CQ focuses on recognizing other cultural preferences and understanding the provided information. In other words, individuals with high metacognitive CQ know how and when to use their cultural knowledge (Ang et al., 2007). Thus, it is considered a higher-order cognitive process (Eisenberg et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2006). The second, Cognitive CQ, is the ability to acquire general knowledge and the structure of cultural knowledge (Lin et al., 2012), where things such as norms, practices, traditions, legal system, cultural economic, and social systems of another culture are obtained through personal experience or educational setting (Kim et al., 2006). With this broad familiarity, individuals with high cognitive CQ possess adequate knowledge to identify similarities and differences between cultures (Idrus, 2021). The third, Motivational CQ, reflects the admiration and interest in learning or adapting to another cultural environment (Ang et al., 2007) and the individual's capability to understand cultural diversity while functioning in different cultural situations (Ang et al., 2007). Thus, individuals with higher motivational CQ can cope better with challenges that occur in the new environment, both affectively and cognitively; this strengthens the ability to adapt to an unfamiliar cross-cultural setting. The fourth, Behavioral CQ, is the ability to use proper verbal and non-verbal communication of another culture that includes terminology, tonality, gestures, personal space, touching rules, dress codes, and time management norms during cross-cultural interactions (Idrus, 2021; Eisenberg et al., 2013). Individuals with higher behavioral CQ have a flexible repertoire of different cultural behavior and can show appropriate modification according to the cultural situations (Eisenberg et al., 2013).

Development of Cultural Intelligence

Cultural Intelligence (CQ), like other forms of intelligence, clearly exists on a continuum and develops over time (Thomas, 2006; Thompson, 2018). It may develop slowly, and while opportunities like working or studying abroad may assist its development, it is also possible that significant improvements in CQ levels might not be observable over a short period (Thomas, 2006). CQ theory seeks to address culture-associated issues by emphasizing human characteristics and personality traits instead of focusing on mere culture-related beliefs and norms (Ang et al., 2007). Therefore, the greater an individual's exposure to cultural diversity, the greater the likelihood that they will have an understanding and appreciation for beliefs that are not their own (Gupta, Singh, Jandhyala, & Bhatt, 2013; Thomas, 2006; Thompson, 2018).

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Strategy

A thematic analysis was conducted to analyze the data from the focus group discussion. The study aimed to understand how international students exercise their emotional and cultural intelligence while adjusting to their university life in Indonesia. A thematic analysis was employed due to the flexibility of the data analysis process, and it can produce insights and emphasize critical concepts to help interpret the data. Purposive sampling was intended to recruit participants who meet the criteria, and data was collected from a focus group discussion session engaging 11 international students.

Participants

The focus group discussion recruited 11 undergraduate respondents (M=5; F=6) from a private university of different majors. Recruited respondents were in their sophomore, junior, and senior years. Respondents' origins varied from countries in Asia.

Selection Criteria

The purposive sampling method was intended to warrant information that could be acquired, and significant patterns could be extracted from the respondents' differences. The recruited respondents varied based on age, gender, countries of origin, study programs, and years in the university. All respondents were read of the nature of the research and consented to be documented.

Method of Analysis

The collected data was analyzed and coded to establish the consistency of the emerging themes. The first analysis recognized repeated perspectives from the extracted information that could be explored more in depth. The study employed coding to identify and categorize the dimensions of the adjustment process and understand the classified data to determine major themes.

RESULTS

The study employed focused group discussion and engaged 11 participants from 9 countries. Respondent details are presented in table 1 below follow with strategies to be culturally and emotionally intelligent.

Table 1. Interview Respondents (Aliases Are Used to Ensure Confidentiality)

Codename	Gender	Year of Study	Country of Origins
Vi	Female	2 nd year	Philippines
Loy	Female	4 th year	Cambodia
Lay	Female	3 rd year	Cambodia
San	Female	4 th year	India
Chu	Female	4 th year	Nigeria
Mis	Female	4 th year	Mozambique
Yaz	Male	2 nd year	Syria
Ali	Male	3 rd year	Somalia
Has	Male	3 rd year	Somalia
Eli	Male	4 th year	Zimbabwe
Ari	Male	2 nd year	Madagascar

The following are major themes that resulted from the discussion with the respondents:

1. Adjustment challenges and its counter effort
2. Shared identities
3. The role of support system and relational needs
4. Social exclusion

DISCUSSION

Adjustment challenges and its counter effort

Transition and change offer constant challenges to the adjustment process. During the discussion, participants reported several challenges they experienced. Language barriers tend to be one of the biggest challenges as none of the international students speak Bahasa Indonesia. Even though the university's primary delivery language is English, daily conversation is often carried out in Bahasa Indonesia. This, indeed, refrains international students from accessing more information and interacting socially.

“.. during my first semester, I actually have zero information or zero knowledge about Bahasa Indonesia, so when we have to work in group, mostly my classmates love to talk in their own language...and I have to always ask a question like how or what are we going to do like because that they discussed with Bahasa Indonesia, so I'm always the last one to get information, to know what is going on, so it's actually feel a little bit awkward and feel like I'm left out...” [Mey]

Some respondents with their origins accented to English also experienced communication challenges. Fellow students and lecturers often find it difficult to understand the message and converse.

“.. trying to like, talk to the classmates, comeback in English, and sometimes you try to say something, and they don't understand your accent, or you don't understand their accent, so it is easier to bond with international students because like we are also facing the same problem.” [Chu]

Despite the challenges, respondents enter those experiences by exercising their adjustment skills involving their ability to regulate emotions and empathy and reported attempts to adjust to the cultural differences.

Shared identities

Respondents who are international students struggling with adjustment establish social relationships easier with fellow international students as they experience the same immersion process. Common grounds were recognized as they identified themselves as international students and shared reality as foreigners to the culture of Indonesia that they enter and communicate easily through English as the global language. “.. it is much easier to breach the gap between international students because you both foreign to this clan, you both to this culture, so you have something to relate to them, something that you both have in common.” [Yaz]

“.. I think making friends with international students is a lot easier because like we all talking in English and we live in the same place and we hang together a lot ... When I came here I was like I was really impressed by the kind of bond international students have here and I am really grateful for them.” [Ali]

The shared similarity strengthened the connection amongst international students as they are bound by the same social identity, living away from their significant others, and struggling to immerse themselves in a new culture while at the same time trying to thrive in their academic performance.

The role of support system and relational needs

One of the needs addressed by the respondents was the importance of having a support system to help with the adjustment process. The presence of significant others help eases the tension and anxiety created by the immersion and exposure to the new culture.

“... my adjustment here to Indonesia was easier with the help of my dad, who has already lived here for like a few years, other than that I think what influenced me to adjust easily to the environment here is that it is very similar to my home country, the Philippines.” [Vi]

Getting assistance from fellow international students who have been immersed longer also contribute to the transition and aid in navigating daily life needs. “.. a lot of international students here help to navigate through Indonesian system and how to do the basic stuffs like the malls, where to get the car, I think making friends with international students is a lot easier” [Ali]

Shared similarities create bonding among international students that strengthen their connection and establish a support system for each other. “.. I guess we...like to see ourselves as a family, I would say. So, when we are around each other, we are pretty much trying to accommodate each and every one of us, despite our differences.” [Eli]

Since the need for a support system is prominent amongst international students, the need to establish a social relationship is also in demand. However, relational needs are often not met since there are discrepancies between the expected quality of social relations and reality.

“.. I would say the one thing that stuck out to me a lot of them are very social, like they are Social Butterflies but the con of that is the fact that you don't really build deep connections with people when you have a lot of people around you, so that I used to find in friendships and relationships in the Middle East or in other countries that I have lived in here is a bit more I would say shallow because everybody just want to know you as hi like socialize..” [Yaz]

Respondents reported on how the established relations were more on a hospitality level and faced difficulties in connecting deeper.

Social exclusion

Despite the challenges of establishing an actual connection, efforts were still made to develop social interactions. However, dealing with challenges such as language barriers and contrasting cultures might result in creating a sense of isolation among international students.

“.. I had two other foreigners with me in class but both of them were very fluent in Bahasa and both of them had lived here for extensive period of time. So like, when like let's say we're going in group setting and people would start speaking Bahasa they would be included in the conversation. So, I was the only one who was left out.” [Yaz]

“.. It's hard to find common interest, form relationship with them because I did not understand the language..” [Has]. Because they are often perceived as different, fellow local students might prefer to establish social interactions amongst themselves or use their native language. Despite they may mean no harm in doing so and serve a convenient purpose, yet it triggers a sense of isolation and being left out for the international students when they are not engaged in a conversation or when there is an ongoing conversation using a language they don't speak.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed expansive challenges international students face when immersing in the new culture in Indonesia. While some international students experience easier transitions due to the cultural similarities, others might need to thrive harder to adjust. When dealing with contrasting cultural elements that can be perceived as challenges or threats, international students were forced to adjust differently and exercise social skills as a manifestation of their emotional and cultural intelligence. University management needs to give more attention to the dynamics of international students' interaction with fellow local students to minimize the risk of exclusion and ensure greater immersion. Developing a healthy ecosystem and skills development activities that support the development of CQ, not only for international students, but also for fellow local students, might be a way to overcome this problem.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We would like to show our gratitude to the eleven respondents for sharing their thoughts and provide valuable inputs that allow us to conduct this research.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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