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The Adjustment Journey of International Students in Tertiary Education

by

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A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Education

In the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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### **Abstract**

With more international students pursuing higher education in many countries, researchers have shown more interest in understanding international students' adjustment issues. The current paper presents a review of the literature on the adjustment issues of international students, including international students' adjustment patterns, factors affecting their adjustment, and university support, etc. The review results show that international students may have more difficulties adjusting to their new environment than do host-nation students, thus are in greater need of proper and accessible university services and support. Suggestions for better university services are reviewed in this paper.

*Keywords:* adjustment issues, higher education, international students, sociocultural adjustment, student support, university services

### **Introduction**

With more and more students gaining access to overseas tertiary education, international students now make up a sizeable proportion of tertiary education students in many countries. In Canada, about 134,600 international students were enrolled in tertiary programmes in 2012 (Statistics Canada, 2016). A report by Statistics Canada (2016) showed that “The majority of international students in Canada were from Asia, which accounted for over 60% of international students in every province, except for New Brunswick and Quebec” (p.67). The First Statistical Release from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2013-14) showed that the total of non-UK students pursuing higher education in the UK increased slightly by 3% to 435,500 students during the 2012-11 and the 2013-14 academic years, and the majority are from China, with 87,895 Chinese students. The enrolment of international students studying at U.S. colleges and universities increased by 10% to 974,926 in the 2014/15 academic year (Institute of International Education, 2015a). According to the Open Doors Report by the Institute of International Education (2015b), the top countries of origin of international students in the United States are China, India, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Canada.

International students are vital to the host country and institutions as they make significant economic and educational contributions. According to Lee and Wesche, international students in Canada are “viewed as an important-even essential-source of revenue by post-secondary institutions” (as cited in Andrade, 2006, p.132). In addition to the economic contribution, international students also promote a better understanding of diverse cultures and global issues (Association of International Educators, 2003). The benefits of having international students include enriching intercultural higher education, adding international perspectives, developing

global connections, and preparing domestic students for cross-cultural communication and cultural diversity (Andrade, 2006).

From the perspective of the country sending international students, many parents and students regard pursuing overseas tertiary education as a valuable and beneficial experience in which to explore new cultures and to improve academic knowledge and career competencies (V.Lin, 2010). However, aside from the positive effects of pursuing higher education overseas, international university students may experience more adjustment difficulties than do native students, which may impact their academic success and psychological and physical health. Thus, international students may be in greater need of long-term support in adjustment than domestic students (Andrade, 2006; Constantine, Kindaichi, Okazaki, Gainor, & Baden, 2005; Greggo & Jacob, 2001; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen & Van Horn, 2002; Lacina, 2002). Adjustment challenges faced by international students have been examined in many studies. These include language barriers and concerns, inadequate accommodation, lack of social support, isolation and cultural misunderstanding, confusion with formal/informal student-professor relationship, lack of social interactions and lasting friendships with host nationals, financial pressures, and public transport difficulties. The adjustment issues faced by international students can be placed into three categories: personal challenges, psychosocial challenges, and academic challenges (Kambouropoulos, 2014; Myles & Cheng, 2003). Some of these problems can be sorted out quickly upon arrival while others are longer lasting, and need to be handled on an ongoing basis (Coles & Swami, 2012; Henze & Zhu, 2012).

For the economic and educational benefits of international students to continue, host countries and universities should make more effort to understand the adjustment challenges and

needs of international students and improve available long-term support and services. Ryan (2011) suggested viewing international students as an asset and “source of internationalism for universities” rather than as problem (p.644). He also stated that university should promote “a truly internationalized and transcultural learning environment,” where “everyone is international and global knowledge and skills become available to all” (p.644).

This project presents a critical review of the literature on international students’ adjustment. Specifically, it will discuss four general aspects: (1) adjustment process (pattern) of international students; (2) factors that affect international students’ adjustment; (3) suggestions for better university support to competently meet the needs of international students, and (4) suggestions for international students. The review results showed that the well-cited U-curve model of adjustment stages that international students move through has been questioned and challenged. And although some international students reported positive adjustment experiences, many may have more difficulties acculturating to a new environment than host-nation students, thus in general international students have a greater need for appropriate and accessible university support.

### **Definition of Terms**

**International students.** International students, as defined by Andrade (2006), are “individuals enrolled in institutions of higher education who are [studying] on temporary student visas and are non-native English speakers” (p.134). In the context of this project, I’ve defined international students as individuals who travel to a different country to pursue higher education. They may temporarily reside in the new country or plan to immigrate and live there following completion of the programme at their current institution. According to a national survey of international students in Canada, “approximately 50% of Canada’s international students indicate

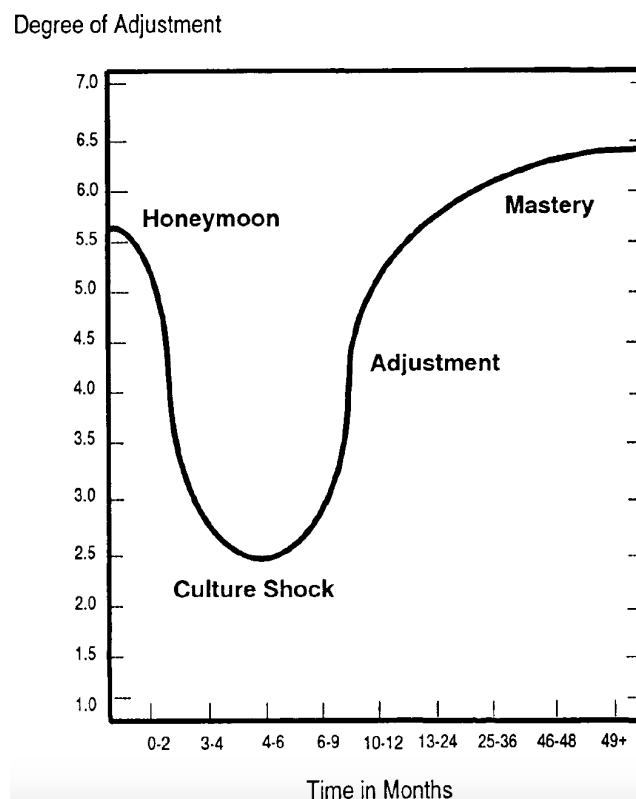
that it is their long-term goal to gain permanent residency” (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 2014, p. 5).

**Adjustment.** The success of international students adapting to a new environment is often labelled “adjustment” or “adaptation” in the literature. Generally, international students appeared to be well adjusted to university life in their host country. According to BC International Student Survey, for example, 87 percent of international students were satisfied or very satisfied with their post-secondary experiences (BC Stats & BC Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, 2015). However, students pursuing tertiary education in a different country may encounter more linguistic and cultural obstacles in addition to the common challenges of adjusting to a new academic and social environment, especially when they are at a great distance from family and friends back home. Generally, international students’ adjustment to the host culture has been categorized into two types: psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment (Ward, Okura, Kennedy, & Kojima, 1998). Psychological adjustment is strongly affected by factors such as personality and social support while sociocultural adaptation is more influenced by interaction with host nationals (Ward et al., 1998). Likewise, Berry (1997) described psychological and sociocultural adjustment as follows:

The first refers to a set of internal psychological outcomes including a clear sense of personal and cultural identity, good mental health, and the achievement of personal satisfaction in the new cultural context; the second is a set of external psychological outcomes that link individuals to their new context, including their ability to deal with daily problems, particularly in the areas of family life, work and school. (p.14)

Although the two aspects of adjustment are conceptually distinct, they are also interrelated as the combined effect of different factors.

**Adjustment pattern.** For decades, a great deal of research on sojourners' psychological and sociocultural adjustment has been conducted to examine their adjustment patterns over time. However, disagreements still remain among researchers. For example, a frequently mentioned and tested pattern of cross-cultural adjustment is the well-known stage pattern of cultural shock (Oberg, 1960), which can also be referred to as the U-curve pattern of cultural adjustment (based on Lysgaard, 1955). The stage hypothesis described the adjustment of sojourners as being a non-linear and fluctuant process, which can be graphically presented by a U-shaped curve (See Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* The U-curve of cross-cultural adjustment (Black & Mendenhall, 1991, p. 227). Copyright 1991 by The Academy of International Business.

According to Oberg (1960), people inserted into a new culture tend to experience culture shock, which can cause negative physical and psychological symptoms such as fear, feelings of helplessness, anger, and worry. The adaptation process to culture shock begins with a honeymoon stage lasting from a few days to 6 months in which people are fascinated by the new cultural environment. This stage is followed by a transition stage in which people have to cope with various new adjustment problems and crises, which may cause negative feelings and attitudes. After a period of gaining confidence and adjustment, people can finally accept and enjoy the new milieu; in other words, achieve full adjustment.

U-curve of adjustment was based on and developed from Lysgaard's study (1955) of 200 Norwegian scholars in the United States. Participants were divided into three groups based on how long they had resided abroad (0-6 months, 6-18 months, or more than 18 months). Participants in the first and third group reported better adjustment than those in the second group. He concluded that adjustment is easy at the beginning, followed by difficulty during the 6-18 month period in which sojourners encounter the greatest adjustment difficulties, and gradually they feel well adjusted again after 18 months of residence.

Later, Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) extended the U-curve pattern to a W-curve pattern, as they suggested that international sojourners would go through a second U-curve of adjustment when returning to their home country, similar to their adjustment process abroad.

However, one major shortcoming of the stage or U-curve description of sojourner adjustment is that it only examines psychological aspects of adjustment but did not take other so-

cial variables that may affect each stage into account (Ward et al., 1998). A recent study, for example, showed that not all the international students encounter the crisis phase of culture shock (Wang, Wei, & Chen, 2015). The results from their longitudinal study of Chinese International students indicated that the majority of students did not experience significant psychological changes related to culture shock, rather other variables such as social support, positive problem-solving appraisal, and higher self-esteem were associated with better adjustment (Wang et al., 2015). The decrease of cultural shock among international students may relate to the development of the Internet and social media, through which students can get loads of information about other cultures. Some international students may learn about the host culture before their departure, and though there may still be a gap between their expectations and the reality, they may experience less culture shock than international students did 30 years ago. Moreover, international students' adjustment processes could also be associated with their country of origin. In other words, do international students from the same cultural group or certain geographical area (i.e., Asian international students) share one similar pattern or similar characteristics during their adjustment? The cultural similarities (to be further discussed further in later section) between home and host country will also largely determine the scale of culture shock that international students experience.

Besides the potential cultural impact on international students' adjustment process, other variables like language proficiency, gender, personality, and social interaction with host nationals, may also be interrelated in one's adjustment process, which may make each sojourner different in the degree or the process model of both psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002), for example, found that the psychological adjustment of both

domestic and international students may be intimately influenced by and fluctuate with the academic calendar. Such factors need to be taken into consideration as well when specifying the adjustment pattern of international sojourners.

In addition, the problematic methodology is considered to be another major shortcoming of the U-curve pattern. As summarized in Church's (1982) review, the U-curve pattern of adjustment was largely based on cross-sectional data rather than taking a longitudinal approach, which would have been a more appropriate approach to specify and explore changes in individuals' adjustment over time. As a result, further longitudinal studies have been conducted, and demonstrated that the U-curve hypothesis of adjustment was weak and unreliable, and could either not be proven or only occurred in a small number of cases. For example, Ward et al.'s (1998) longitudinal study examined the measurement of psychological (depression) and socio-cultural (social difficulty) adjustment of sojourners over time. Findings showed no support for the U-curve theory of adjustment. Both psychological and sociocultural adjustment problems were greatest at the entry point to a new culture and decreased over time, which appears to be a linear process. In addition, no further evidence showing significant changes in the 6-12 month period occurred, which is contrary to the U-curve hypothesis.

Ward et al.'s (1998) claim may be more reliable than assuming a U-curve pattern of adjustment. Psychological adjustment problems may be greatest at the entry point as international students experience immediate life changes upon entry to a new culture milieu, where they would have the most limited resources and social support due to not having any prior experience with the culture. For this reason, they may feel depressed or experience other negative psychological symptoms mostly at the beginning of their adaptation. However, I believe there is no uni-

versal pattern of adjustment that fits all international sojourners. Not every international sojourners' psychological and sociocultural adjustment problems would peak at entry point and decrease over time as adjusting to a new cultural environment is a lasting and uneven process and is unique to each individual. For example, a study of Saudi international students in the United States showed that most participants experience the most difficult period of adjustment for the first three months, and some others struggled most after three or six months. Only one participant reported she had an "exciting" period at the beginning and started to struggle after 1-2 years (Lefdahl-Davis & Perrone-McGovern, 2015). It is important to note that some of the adjustment obstacles international sojourners face may come at different times or may remain on an ongoing basis, and therefore require different responses and long-term supports. As Foley (2012, para. 8) states, for example:

There is no timetable for integration. It's a messy, unpredictable beast with a timeline all its own. We all adapt at our own pace, in our own way. If I had to draw a diagram of my own adjustment, it would look something like this:



*Figure 2.* Foley's Diagram of Adjustment. Retrieved from Foley (2012). Copyright 2010-2015 by Maria Foley.

Also, although many studies have been conducted to explore the pattern of international students' adjustment, there is limited research that investigates adjustment from pre-arrival to post-arrival. Further investigations could examine the complete process of international students' adjustment, which begins with preparation in their home country and ends when they feel fully comfortable in the new culture.

### **Factors Affecting International Students' Adjustment**

Factors affecting international students' adjustment to a new culture, such as social factors (i.e., social support and social self-efficacy), and demographic factors (i.e., language proficiency, coping style, culture of origin, gender, age, education level, length of stay) were frequently studied in the international students adjustment literature. This section focuses on how major social and demographic factors influence international students' adjustment and the interrelated relationships between factors in order to understand international students' cross-cultural adjustment better.

#### **Social Support**

Social support is always highlighted in cross-cultural adjustment literature as a significant indicator of international students' adjustment. In particular, interacting socially with host nationals and domestic students is believed by many researchers to be beneficial to adjustment. For example, results from a longitudinal study of Chinese international students indicated that social connection with the host society is a significant predictor of higher satisfaction and better adjustment (Wang et al., 2015), which is consistent with findings from past studies which stated that international students who have more social interaction with host nationals experience better adjustment and less strain (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002).

However, international students reported less social support than domestic sojourners in the early stages of their arrival, and this lack of support for international students can impede their transition into the new environment. Although some domestic students also leave their family and friends at home when relocating to school, they have an advantage with interacting socially as they share the same language and culture as those at the host school and they are likely to have more chances to visit their family or friends within the country (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002). International students, on the other hand, are more likely to have negative feelings like homesickness and loneliness due to the unfamiliar surroundings and a lack of social support in the new country (Kambouropoulos, 2014). Those who traveled a greater distance, such as international students from Asia studying in Europe or America, may encounter additional linguistic and cultural challenges compared to their domestic counterparts and international students from other cultures similar to that of the host country, which renders them in greater need of social support.

Moreover, many international students reported having difficulty with interacting or forming relationships with domestic students, which further highlighted their needs. For example, findings from the recent BC international student survey showed that engaging socially with Canadian students has been reported as challenging for international students in BC post-secondary institutions (BC Stats & BC Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, 2015), which is consistent with findings from a national survey showing “the formation of social bonds between international students and Canadian counterparts-has been unsuccessful” (CBIE, 2014, p.38). The limited interaction between international students and domestic students may be associated with international students’ capability to communicate in English, cultural and

value differences, security of friendship networks with co-nationals, and a lack of social opportunities for cross-cultural interactions.

Even though international students reported less social support and difficulties in social engagement with host nationals, few international students seek counselling assistance in the event of the crisis (Lacina, 2002; Onabule & Boes, 2013; Reynolds & Constantine, 2007). The underuse of counselling services may be due to misunderstandings about the services, the negative perception of counselling, and a lack of information about the available services on campus. For example, some international students may regard seeking help with mental health as a great shame to his or her family (Lacina, 2002). One participant in Onabule and Boes's study (2013) reported that she regards the word "counselling" as a negative term and her friends probably think the same way. Other participants suggested that they value counselling services when the counsellor has "a warm, vivacious, and welcoming personality" (p.58). Other concerns associated with international students' willingness to seek counselling services may be the counsellor's different cultural background. Most counsellors at host universities are English speakers from Western culture, but due to the diverse cultural background of the international students population, international students may feel it is difficult to completely trust or build a close connection with a counsellor who comes from a different culture (Lacina, 2002). However, a counsellor from a different culture may be regarded as less judgemental when dealing with international students or even care more for the international students' needs; thus, some international students may find the culture differences refreshing and might prefer talking to a counsellor from another culture. Due to the different needs of international students with regard to counselling services, it

may be more helpful if the university could provide each counsellor's detailed profile on the school's website and give international students options to choose the counsellor they prefer.

International students may find it easier to communicate and form social networks with students of same ethnic background or other international students as they share similar cultural values or face common difficulties in their adjustment process. The BC International Student Survey asked international students about the sources of support they rely on for non-academic issues; data indicated that international students would primarily rely on other international students from their own country and or other international students at the institution (BC Stats & BC Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development 2015, p.31). Similar findings from Constantine et al.'s (2005) study showed that international students generally prefer seeking help and advice from friends and family members when facing cultural adjustment problems. Many international students developed social networks with co-nationals from the early stages of their arrival in the host country. The co-cultural community can be helpful to international students' adjustment as it provides great support and relief. International students can share the same languages, values, and both academic and sociocultural difficulties within the co-cultural group. However, as shown in Coles and Swami's study (2012), some students felt the co-cultural group hindered their adjustment due to isolating them from domestic students and international students from different ethnic origins. Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) also indicated that too much reliance on same-nationals for interaction and support may work against international students' best interests. Although international students experienced growing confidence and eagerness to interact with domestic students as time progressed, they also reported that the early stage of adjustment is crucial to their future social life as it is harder to develop social

networks with domestic or other international students after settling into fixed co-cultural groups or due to increased academic and work pressure (Coles & Swami, 2012). The likelihood for international students to have continuing or increasing difficulty in their interactions with domestic students calls for more institutional help and assistance. Student organizations and societies, for example, could promote social interactions between international students and domestic students by organizing social events, launching cross-cultural communication programs, and developing other practical solutions (to be discussed in later section).

When considering international students' social life, other factors such as English language proficiency (to be discussed later), age, education level, and family responsibilities come into play as well. For instance, data from BC International Students Survey indicates that graduate students (whose median age is relatively higher than undergraduate and developmental students) are more likely to have a spouse or dependents, which make them more likely to have different housing requirement and lifestyles (BC Stats & BC Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development, 2015). It could be time and energy consuming or even impossible for international students who have family obligations to be more socially engaged.

### **Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy is “the degree to which individuals believe they can successfully execute expected behaviours” (Black & Mendenhall, 1991, p.244), which sometimes “involves a willingness to initiate behaviour in social situations” (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004, p.237). Self-efficacy has been found by a number of researchers to be associated with international students' adjustment to a new culture. For instance, Black and Mendenhall (1991) reported that “individuals with higher levels of self-efficacy would likely be more willing to experiment and

try to imitate new behaviours” (p.244) in the host culture than individuals with lower levels of self-efficacy. The former are more likely to receive more feedback and learn about the new culture through their willingness to learn, which can better promote their cultural adjustment. It is consistent with later findings by Mak and Tran (2001) who found that international students in Australia with higher cross-cultural self-efficacy experienced better adjustment.

Reports indicated that cultures of origin, which determine one’s cultural values, could have a significant impact on one’s self-efficacy. In Constantine et al.’s (2004) study, for instance, the results suggested that social self-efficacy skills were not significantly correlated with the adjustment of participants (African, Asian, and Latin American international students in the United States), which is contrary to the mainstream belief that social self-efficacy is associated with depression in international students in the United States. These international students came from cultures that value communalism and collectivism. According to Markus and Kitayama (1991), people from collectivistic cultures tend to feel a stronger responsibility to solve and minimize their problems for themselves and do not burden others; in their cultures, harmonious interdependent relationships, and social duty are also emphasized. Based on these findings, cultural values could have a strong impact on international students’ self-efficacy. International students from collectivist cultures (i.e., Chinese international students) may be more restrained in social situations, as they may feel uncomfortable being too different from others. They may be unwilling to initiate new behaviours when encountering unfamiliar situations, rather they may tend to keep their problems to themselves or with close friends and stick to their traditional ways of dealing with things, which may impede their adjustment process.

In addition, switching between different language settings may also be intimately related to one's social self-efficacy. In other words, language difficulties or the low confidence levels in using English may be obstacles lead to enhancing one's social self-efficacy. Results of Lin and Betz's (2009) study indicated that Chinese and Taiwanese international students have higher levels of social self-efficacy when communicating in their native language and have lower social self-efficacy when switching to an English-speaking setting. Data also showed that as long as they were interacting in their native language, international students' social self-efficacy levels appeared to be as high or even higher than their American counterparts. In other words, international students are as confident as domestic students when speaking in their native language. This finding may partly account for the stereotype that many international students are shy and unwilling to participate in social conversations or classroom discussions. International students' silence in the classroom or public places may be a result of having to communicate in a second language. Their silence could further impede their social interactions and cause isolation, which may make them feel even less confident. As most counsellors and other professionals working at universities are English speakers, it is important for them to be aware of the impact of language on international students' social self-efficacy and their struggles living in two different worlds to better enhance their social self-efficacy.

Research also found that Asian students' cross-cultural self-efficacy could be enhanced through activities such as "active cross-cultural interactions, watching peer performance in social contexts, soliciting feedback and encouragement for their own performance" (Li & Gasser, 2005, p.572), thus further improving their sociocultural adjustment. This finding again brings up the importance of promoting cross-cultural interactions in international for students' adjustment.

Thus, researchers need to broaden their view to consider international students' social self-efficacy along with further investigation on how cultural values impact international students' self-construal.

### **Language Proficiency**

In addition to the social factors, language proficiency is one of the most frequently mentioned factors that are believed to correlate with international students' adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Lacina, 2002; Myles & Cheng, 2003; Rawlings & Sue, 2013; Sarkodie-Mensah, 1998; Robertson, Holleran, & Samuels, 2015; Senyshyn, Warford, & Zhan, 2000). A number of research studies have focused on language proficiency's impact on the international students' academic activities and achievement. For example, international students in Kambouropoulos' (2014) study reported their anxiety about course requirement such as presenting a tutorial paper in class, which was, to a large degree, due to their inadequacy in English. Likewise, one student from Taiwan in Gebhard's (2012) study reported that she needed to rehearse in her mind everything she would say before participating in classroom discussions to ensure the grammar was correct, which prevented her from keeping up with the discussion. Further, in Trice's (2003) study of professors' perceptions of graduate international students' academic challenges, most professors felt English language proficiency was the main factor negatively affecting graduate international students' academic performance.

In addition to the academic effects, language proficiency is also an important factor affecting international students' cultural and social adjustment (Constantine et al., 2004). In particular, language proficiency is essential for international students to communicate effectively with host nationals. According to Myles and Cheng (2003), interactional competence in English and a

desire to engage in social situations are essential to communication with native English-speaking students and others in the host environment. In turn, effective communication with host nationals helps international students to develop social bonds with domestic students, which further facilitates their social adjustment. As stated by Kim (1994):

Communication-the process of encoding and decoding verbal and non-verbal information-lies at the heart of cross-cultural adaptation...It is only through communication that strangers can come to learn the significant symbols of the host culture, and thereby to organize their own and others' activities successfully. (p.394)

Some research has measured international students' competence in English using formal English test score such as TOEFL. For instance, Senyshyn et al. (2000) reported international students who have higher TOEFL scores (590-609) tend to feel more satisfied and confident in their social and academic lives. The lowest scoring group (530-549), on the other hand, felt least confident and satisfied. However, formal English test scores used for enrolment requirements such as TOEFL and GRE may not be sufficient measures for predicting international students' English proficiency in social situations. For example, although most international students interviewed in Sun and Chen's (1999) study achieved high TOEFL and GRE scores, many of them reported feeling their English ability is not adequate in many communication situations and in writing. International students in the study considered lack of social and cultural communication skills as a major impediment to their social adjustment. The language issues that faced by many international students may be a result of different scales of difficulty between different languages.

For example, Chinese international students may encounter fewer difficulties learning Japanese or Korean than they would learning English or French. Moreover, several Chinese international students in Rawlings and Sue's (2013) study expressed that the English they learned in China did not fully prepare them for daily communication in the U.S. They experienced a gap between the formal English they were taught in China and the informal English they heard in America. Much of the English international students learned in their home country were in formal classroom settings, which mainly focused on English skills for academic use, especially reading skills. Effective communication, however, requires more than English proficiency; knowledge about cultural norms, relationships among people, communication styles, and nonverbal behaviour are crucial as well (Myles & Cheng, 2003). Moreover, subjective English fluency scores, such as the confidence and comfort levels in speaking English, as well as frequency of use, seem to be significant predictors of acculturative adjustment (Wang et al., 2015; Yeh & Inose, 2003). It is noteworthy that the cultural differences of international students may also play an important role in their daily conversation with host nationals or with other international students. For example, the majority of students in Senyshyn et al.'s (2000) study reported that conversational style in their host country (the U.S.) was different from that of their home country, which may lead to misunderstandings and deter international students from developing and maintaining friendships with students of different ethnic origins. It is emphasized that language proficiency should be considered along with the social factors when examining factors associated with international students' adjustment (Wang et al., 2015). Researchers and university personnel working with international students should be aware of the interrelationship between students' culture and their language

performance, thus better understanding their communication styles and other aspects related to language proficiency.

### **Gender**

With regard to international students' adjustment, it may also be important to take gender into consideration. Most literature reviewed on this matter showed that female international students tend to encounter more adjustment difficulties than do male international students. For instance, findings from Rajapaksa and Dundes' (2002) study showed that female international students were more likely to have negative feelings during adjustment than their male counterparts. Similar results from Senyshyn et al.'s (2000) study indicated that males were more satisfied and confident in the adjustment process than females, who suffered more difficulties and problems. Moreover, in the event of a crisis or emergency, male international students also reported a higher level of willingness to seek counselling support (Onabule & Boes, 2013). The differences in adjustment between males and females may be partly because, in some cases, women experience more stress when seeking a balance between the traditional family and societal expectations on females at home and the values of the host country. As shown in Tang and Dion's (1999) study, Chinese female students tend to experience greater conflict than Chinese male students regarding traditional gender roles and cultural values. Further, according to Inman, Ladany, Constantine, and Morano (2001), women from South Asian cultures experienced difficulties and pressure negotiating the differing cultural values of the host and home country. Their home culture tended to emphasize values related to family relationships, marriage, dating practices, sex role expectations, and religion, whereas American culture emphasizes independence and personal goals. Those studies indicated the existing discrepancy between female international students' self val-

ues and societal or parental expectations. Many women in some Asian countries, for example, are still expected to fulfill their family role (taking care of the husband and children) over pursuing their own career or being independence. If they are not married before a certain age, they experience additional pressure and misunderstandings from their relatives and society. When those women are international students studying abroad, they may face this additional stress on top of the pressure of academic and social adjustment. Moreover, females could be more emotional than males in many situations, which may have an impact on how female students cope with their stress and difficulties (coping styles), thus further influencing their adjustment. Based on these discussions, it may be important to consider gender along with the other social and cultural factors so that certain groups of international students' adjustment needs may be better met in the future.

### **Cultural Dissimilarity and Distance**

Cultural distance may also play an important role in international students' adjustment. International students can easily encounter cultural shock when there are few similarities between their home culture and the host culture. For example, a Chinese student in Rawlings and Sue's (2013) study was shocked when he saw American people drink ice water and wash their hands with warm water, as people in China would drink hot water and wash their hands with cold water. Several Chinese students also recognized the differences between what they learned about American culture in China and the reality of American culture. International students from similar cultures to that of the host culture, on the other hand, may experience fewer difficulties adjusting to the new environment. This is supported by Senyshyn et al.'s (2000) study showed

that students from Western Europe and Canada adjusted better to the American culture and experienced fewer problems than did Asian students.

In addition, cultural differences lead to different cultural values, which may lead international students to experience more challenges in adjusting to the new culture. For example, results from Constantine et al.'s (2004) study suggested that international students from Africa tend to experience lower well-being than their counterparts from Asia or Latin America. They suggested that African students may face a larger gap between their culture and Western culture. Moreover, as Africa is not one of the major continents sending international students, there may be less opportunity for African international students to share their values with students of their ethnic origin. However, since most of the literatures reviewed have focused on the majority group of international students (Asian), more investigation should be conducted to understand the adjustment of minority groups such as African international students better.

Another important element when discussing cultural distance is different religious beliefs. International students may have diverse religions and customs as they are from a variety of cultural backgrounds. However, they may face many challenges regarding their religious practices and other religious needs in the host country. For example, some international Muslim students in Taiwan expressed difficulty finding a place to pray. They also reported difficulties in finding halal food due to the small population of Muslims in Taiwan (Chen, Liu, Tsai, & Chen, 2015). For most students with religious beliefs, it is significant to attend certain prayers or other activities during certain events or holidays even if that means missing classes yet they may feel great social pressures if their religious needs are not accepted or understood by university faculty (Lacina, 2002). In addition to the common challenges related to religious practice, some in-

international students also need to deal with social discrimination against their faith. Some Muslims students in Chen et al.'s (2015) study expressed their concerns about the negative attitudes held towards Muslims, and their religious practice. Religious international students may be in greater need of university and societal support for their religious practice and adjustment issues.

### **Coping Style**

Although literature on various factors affecting international students' adjustment is quite extensive, studies examining international students' coping styles is relatively limited. As shown in the literature, international students utilize a wide variety of coping strategies when dealing with adjustment problems. They may use school resources, become involved in dormitory and campus activities, seek language support (for example: acquiring a conversation partner) and join students' organizations (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). Tung (2011) demonstrated that international students' help-seeking behaviours can be formal (i.e., utilizing university counselling services) and informal (i.e., sharing their situation with friends, family members, and roommates). He also noted most international students tend to seek help from informal sources and underutilize mental health services due to cultural stigma, lack of awareness of available services, and language difficulty, which is consistent with findings reviewed previously (Tung, 2011).

It is noteworthy that not all the behaviours that international students adopted positively affect their adjustment. For example, a study of 70 international students suggested that they utilize multiple forms of coping techniques (adaptive and maladaptive) at a similar frequency (Jackson, Ray, & Bybell, 2013). For example, some international students may seek social support but also skip classes or become addicted to video games while they face adjustment difficul-

ties. Some international students may complain and expect others to adapt when facing adjustment issues (Gebhard, 2012). Adaptive coping behaviours, such as seeking social support can be a predictor of less acculturative stress and better adjustment. On the other hand, maladaptive coping strategies could deter or even obstruct international students' adjustment to the new culture. Besides being a predictor, international students' coping strategies can also be an outcome of their adjustment challenges and acculturative stress. For example, international students who encounter more adjustment difficulties or stress may utilize fewer social supports both in the home and the host country, which could lead to more adjustment issues and stress (Jackson et al., 2013).

It is also important to take cultural factors into consideration when examining international students' coping behaviour. As discussed previously, international students from some collectivistic cultures tend to think it is their own responsibility to solve their problems. They may try their best to minimize their issues and may regard reaching out for help as a burden to others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). International students' adjustment is not only affecting their well-being but is also related to the host university's intercultural education reputation. It is not only international students' own obligation and responsibility to adjust. Sometimes international students may not even recognize their crisis or need for support or the benefits of reaching out for support (Gebhard, 2012). Therefore, during their adjustment process, international students may need more guidance and support programs from the university in order to adjust to the new country.

### **Other Factors**

Other factors that may affect international students' sociocultural adjustment include age, financial situation, the length of residence in the new culture, cultural knowledge, family obligations, and personal circumstances and incidents. It is important to note that various situations and individual factors could affect the adjustment of each individual. Studies on international students' adjustment should not take any factor as the sole predictor. The relationship between those variables and their impact on international students' adjustment processes requires more investigation.

### **Recommendations and Implications**

#### **Suggestions for Universities**

**Promoting lasting social interactions and relationships.** Given the importance of social support, especially the benefit of lasting interactions and relationships with host country nationals in international students' adjustment, universities could focus on helping international students build social contacts within the local community and with domestic students. As shown in the literature, the initial period of international students' adjustment is a crucial time for them to form friendships and develop social networks. As many international students tend to easily blend in with co-cultural groups, some social events could be organized upon international students' arrival to provide more opportunities for cross-cultural interaction. For example, departments could hold a freshman welcome party during the first or second week of the academic year. Professors, students from former years, and new arrivals (both domestic and international) could be invited to the party, where they could share their personal stories and some of their suggestions. The welcome party could be less formal and more festive than the official orientation or meetings. International and domestic students could be divided into random groups, where they

could get to know each other through small games and chatting. Professors, former students, and first-year students in the department could even entertain the group by performing dances, songs, stage plays, or music. During the party, students from diverse cultural backgrounds could develop friendships based on common hobbies or share their contact information with one another. And as it would be held within the department, it would be easier for international students to feel a sense of community and gain more information about available supports within the department during the early stage of their transition.

Other events could also promote social interactions between international students and domestic students. Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU), for example, is one of the most popular destinations for international students studying in Beijing. International students from more than 160 countries pursue their studies at BLCU. To promote a diverse cultural environment and facilitate cross-cultural communication between students, BLCU holds a famous annual event called the World Culture Festival, where international students from diverse cultural backgrounds can share their culture (i.e., food, traditional cloth, arts, etc.) to other students and university staff. BLCU also welcomes people outside the university to attend the festival, where they could enjoy stage performances, taste food, communicate with international students from diverse cultures, and be inspired by the welcoming and culturally diverse environment. I attended this event two years ago, and found it to be worthy of the name—it really is a mini expo of cultures. I could feel the international students' love for their home culture through their enthusiastic introduction and presentations. Other universities could promote cultural prosperity and a dynamic environment through similar practices.

The results of this study also indicated how language proficiency and communication skills could help international students to become socially engaged with domestic students. However, many international students feel unprepared for communication with local people due to inadequate English communication skills and the gap between what they learned in their home country and the reality they face in their host country. Different expressions or misunderstandings in social conversations also prevent many international students from having a positive social experience and interactions with local people. For example, when I first arrived in Canada, though I had no problem opening a bank account or buying groceries at a store, I did feel nervous when ordering at Tim Hortons (a Canadian coffee franchise) since I was unfamiliar with the menu and the way people commonly order. I did not even know what “double-double” (a way Canadians order coffee, meaning two measures of cream and two measures of sugar) meant at that time, and I wish I could have known earlier. And I was confused about some informal terms used in daily conversation, which are unique to Canadian culture such as “toonie” (the Canadian two dollar coin), “loonie” (the Canadian one dollar coin), “poutine” (a French Canadian dish made with French fries and cheese curds topped with gravy; Poutine, 2016), etc. Universities could help international students to transition and to have smoother interactions with locals if they provide some introductory sessions on practical sayings and words used in day-to-day situations (i.e., at the bank, the grocery store, restaurants, or coffee shop) in the early stages of international students’ arrival. Further, university faculty and organizations, such as the international students’ associations, could offer language programs like Conversation Partners, English Cafe, or Social Language Corners for international students to learn local cultural norms and language used in social communications with host country students. Universities that have

already launched such programs could hand out information sheets with the program's name and contact information to international students during orientation, which could encourage international students to get involved earlier.

As an international student at the University of Victoria, I benefitted a lot from the Conversation Partners Programme held by the UVic International Student Services, where I built connections with local students and learned cultural norms and communication skills. In this program, I was paired up with a local female student as a conversation partner, and we had a conversation once or twice a week. Sometimes we set up topics that we were interested in such as food, films, or language for social events. We would also play card games or go out for dinner, which helped me to learn about both language and culture in real-life situations. During the semester, there are also some social events like Board Game Night held by the programme to bring all the domestic and international students in the programme together and to help them connect with each other. Even though I have now stopped participating in the conversation programme, as my conversation partner has graduated and moved to Vancouver, we still catch up now and then and share photos through social networks. Developing social bonds with domestic students, though not so many, helped me feel more accepted in the new country.

It is also important for university professionals and students to understand that cultural difference may also affect international students' social communication style. For example, international students from Asian countries may communicate in a more mild and indirect way than students from Western culture, which may cause misunderstandings during the conversation. Sometimes Asian students tend to think more and ask less during classes or in conversation, which may make them, seem passive or unwilling to communicate. As most university profes-

sionals are English speakers, they should be aware of the different communication styles of international students in both classroom and non-classroom settings. Seminars and workshops about different cultural values and communication styles could be provided to all university staff and students to promote learning about one another and the diverse university setting.

**Highlighting the importance of social self-efficacy.** As shown in most literature related to international students' social self-efficacy and their adjustment, students with higher levels of social self-efficacy tend to adjust better to the new culture. However, not all the international students have a high level of confidence in social situations, especially in a new country. Moreover, they may panic in difficult situations and lose confidence in their ability to adjust. During counselling sessions or on other occasions with international students, university personnel could guide students in recognizing the benefits of social self-efficacy in reducing their acculturative stress and achieving cross-cultural adjustment. Universities could also provide workshops for international students to demonstrate the importance of social self-efficacy in the adjustment process. These workshops and education sessions could also be provided to university staff that work with international students. Also, international students could be invited to share their personal adjustment stories to help university professionals better understand their situations. Encouraging international students to participate in improving university services could also help them become more self-confident about their adjustment journey.

Another finding from the review of literature is that social self-efficacy is also a function of language setting (Lin & Betz, 2009). In other words, international students reported a higher level of social self-efficacy when communicating in their native language than in an English setting. It is important for counsellors to understand the impact of language on students' behaviour

and communication style, even the different personalities taken on when switching to a different language setting. For me, although I appreciated the benefits that having English language skills have given me (i.e., the ability to study and live in an English-speaking country), I felt a bit tired and even depressed when I did not have the opportunity to speak my own language for a “long time” (an entire day of group discussions or work). When speaking my own language (Mandarin, Chinese), on the other hand, I feel a sense of belong and identity, also a relief. It is also easier for me to be humorous and confident speaking my native language, which has a positive emotional impact on my daily life as well.

Universities or student societies could provide some opportunities for international students to speak their native languages, and in the meantime, practice their English as well. For example, I volunteered at Mandarin Cafe, which is another conversation partners program on campus. At Mandarin Cafe, Chinese international students provided free classes to Chinese language learners (mostly domestic students and immigrants) on campus. As most of the learners are beginners, I needed to use both English and Chinese to teach more clearly. By participating in such programmes, I felt a sense of achievement in helping other students to learn a second language. Moreover, it provided me with a great environment where I could communicate with domestic students and enhance my social and English skills as well. I think this programme is a win-win practice, which can be promoted to more universities and departments.

**Shedding positive light on counselling support and providing multicultural counselling services.** As mentioned previously, even though many international students experience adjustment difficulties and are under great stress, they have a lower likelihood of using counselling service on campus (Lacina, 2002; Onabule & Boes, 2013; Reynolds & Constantine,

2007). The review of literature indicated that international students' unwillingness to use counselling services is partly due to inadequate information about available services and the stigma that may be attached to seeking counselling support (Yeh & Inose, 2003); yet research indicates that many students would be more likely to reach out for counselling support if they were aware of the services and felt comfortable with using them (Onabule & Boes, 2013). These findings are potentially valuable in improving counselling services for international students. It may be a practical consideration for the university to educate international students about the positive effects of counselling, for example, counsellors could be invited to attend international students' orientation and provide information on counselling services on campus. Some outreach programs or presentations could be organized by the counselling centre, including some general topics such as suicide prevention, stress management, and sociocultural adjustment.

This project also emphasized the benefits of multicultural counselling services for international students. During the process of this project, I've talked with my international friends about their insights and experiences using counselling services. One of my friends, Ms. M, mentioned that she went to the counselling centre once and did not have the desire to go back. The reason was mainly that she found it difficult to share personal feelings and develop a bond with the counsellor using English. Counselling services may be more attractive and beneficial to international students if the university could employ counsellors from diverse culture backgrounds. Currently, there are fourteen counselling staff and four practicum counsellors at the University of Victoria, who adopt different approaches and have strengths in various areas. Two of the counselling staff have a Chinese background, and one of them can offer sessions in Mandarin Chinese. Among the practicum counsellors, one has an educational background in Indigenous Com-

munity Counselling. Another advantage of UVic's counselling services is that students are able to either decide which of the staff they prefer to work with based on their profile or book the next available counsellor if they have no preference, or in the event of an emergency. The university could further enhance the counselling team by including more counsellors from other cultural backgrounds based on the international population attending the institution. Wilton and Constantine (2003) suggested that employing counsellors from diverse cultural backgrounds “could provide additional ‘face validity’ to counselling centres regarding their commitment to serving a culturally diverse student body” (p.184) and also promote stronger cultural ties with international students. In the meantime, existing counsellors could improve their service by becoming more aware of cultural factors when dealing with their clients. The development of such skills could be promoted by practicums and programs in multicultural counselling. For example, Greggo and Jacob (2001) suggested that a cultural exchange programme between international students and graduate practicum students could be promoted by universities. The exchange programme could create a more relaxed and informal environment where international students could share their adjustment issues and increase their openness to future counselling services. And the exchange programme could help counselling practicum students to learn about cultural sensitivity and diversity. Similarly, peer counselling and mentoring by more experienced students (could be both domestic and international students) may also help international students to transition and adjust more easily to the new environment (Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002).

In addition, Yeh and Inose (2003) proposed that counsellors could work collaboratively with other university departments such as student organizations and societies, the office of in-

ternational students, and ESL instructors to develop a more welcome community and informal social networks for international students.

**Offering targeted orientation and pre-arrival package.** The orientation program is another valuable strategy to support international students with their transition into the new stage of their life and provide information on study and life in their new environment. Orientations are useful because they cover a wide array of topics. For example, at the University of Victoria, the International Student Welcome Program provides international students with information on a variety of topics, such as immigration documents, health insurance, academic resources, health and safety programs, and Canadian culture. International students may also need practical information and resources, on topics such as affordable housing, transportation, English language classes, immigration counselling, and career resources (Yakunina, Weigold, Weigold, Hercegovac, & Elsayed, 2013). Mason (2010) notes the importance of such orientations:

Due to increasing diversity, orientation strategies are now commonly tailored to the specific needs of target groups and, as a result, are typically more effective, and frequently more efficient. The development of international student orientation programs led this trend, which now extends to a wide range of student sub-populations. At Queen's University, for example, international students and their families are welcomed and oriented during five days of specialized programming that precedes the general student orientation activities. (p.69)

As mentioned earlier, effective services offered to international students should promote lasting relationships between the international students and host country nationals. The other possible way is to emphasize interaction skills during orientation programs and provide joint orientation programs that encourage and facilitate interaction between international students and host nation students.

Moreover, one way of better preparing international students for their new environment is to provide them with pre-arrival orientation packages. As proposed by Jackson et al. (2013), universities could help international students prepare for arrival by providing various forms of information such as housing assistance, online forms, and opportunities to connect with domestic students. On the University of Victoria's website, international Student Services also provides pre-arrival support and information related to a variety of topics such as campus introduction, immigration documents, health insurance, housing, financial matters, courses, and registration. University departments could also offer an electronic welcome package including useful information or web links to incoming international students via email; this outreach effort could increase international students' preparedness for post-arrival life in the new culture. Moreover, universities could better welcome international students upon their arrival.

**Conducting surveys on international students' adjustment experience.** Feedback from international students in a recent BC International Student Survey (BC Stats & ALMD, 2015) provided valuable insights and information about their adjustment experience. In 2008, BC Stats and the Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development (ALMD) conducted their first web-based International Student Survey targeting international post-secondary students in BC. This survey aimed at better understanding international post-secondary students'

learning and living experience in BC and sharing findings with B.C. public post-secondary institutions, in order to further help universities serve international students' needs better and enhance their studying and adjustment experiences (BC Stats & ALMD, 2009).

In most universities, students are asked to evaluate their academic experience and to provide opinions on their programs and professors at the end of every term. The results of the academic survey help departments and the university to evaluate their teaching methods and to improve their programs.

A similar survey could be conducted by institutions or university departments on international students to gain first-hand information about their adjustment experience. Universities could conduct surveys on international students to collect information on their adjustment experience and difficulties. As international students experience and cope with adjustment challenges on an ongoing basis, the survey could be conducted annually or every term by the department or international student centre. The survey could be anonymous so that international students would be more likely to provide honest suggestions and opinions on improvements that could be made by the university to aid their adjustment process. It is well acknowledged that international students may encounter various kinds of adjustment challenges. Even a group of international students of the same cultural background may have different needs due to differences in age, gender, prior experiences, language competency, financing ability, or family obligations. It is important for universities to learn about students' individual needs throughout their adjustment process; thus, new programs and services could also be planned and launched with the first-hand data collected from surveys with international students.

**Understanding and respecting diverse religions and cultures.** While discussing international students' needs and adjustment issues, religion is an important aspect to be taken into consideration as international students come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and may have different religious beliefs. This review showed that international students who have different religious beliefs from the mainstream local students may experience difficulties carrying out their religious practices and social pressure if their religions or customs were not understood or accepted, especially when their family and social networks reside in their home country, which makes them in greater need of university support.

As Lacina (2002) proposed, university faculty should be accepting and flexible with regards to international students' religious customs and events. For example, instructors could be more aware of the important holidays for different cultures so that instructors do not penalize students for absences due to attending religious holidays. Instructors could set up some rules or give suggestions for international students who need to miss classes due to a religious event in order to minimize the negative repercussions of skipping class. For example, international students could inform their instructors in advance and ask for handouts from classmates to make sure they know the assignments or other schoolwork for the next class. Moreover, universities could provide space on campus for international students to perform religious practices. A private classroom could be a more comfortable space for some international students' prayers and meditation.

In addition to religious practice, celebrating a traditional holiday could be difficult for international students as well for various reasons. For example, in Chinese culture, the Lunar New Year (the Spring Festival) is the most important holiday for family reunions, relaxation, and

celebration. As this holiday usually happens during the school term in other countries, it is difficult for Chinese international students to visit their family back home. Another tradition is that families usually prepare a big dinner and watch the Spring Festival Gala on TV together on New Year's Eve. However, preparing Chinese food and watching the live gala performance on that day with friends can be stressful for international students due to schoolwork and time differences. The stress could lead to other negative symptoms such as homesickness, sleeplessness, or depression. To comfort international students during their important holidays, university departments could plan small holiday gatherings and decorate the hallways or lounge areas to make international students feel at home. International students could even make some decorations and traditional food themselves, which is also a great opportunity to relax and share their cultures with other staff and students in the department.

Speaking of traditional food, it could be challenging for some international students to find their favourite traditional dishes or authentic comfort foods on campus. For example, although the food court in some universities has Asian food, like noodles or Sushi, it is still western style, and sometimes it is far from authentic. Universities could include some Chinese or Korea food or snacks in the food court from local Chinese or Korean stores, or hire an Asian chef who can make the food more authentic.

### **Suggestions for International Students**

It has been almost two years now since I came to this country to pursue a higher degree, without knowing anyone. I still remember on the day before I left Beijing, my best friend told me she thought I was a brave girl, who is optimistic about changes and challenges. Now looking back on this journey, all the highs and lows I experienced have made me even stronger. Although

I am still finding my direction along the path, I would like to share some personal suggestions with other international students who have also traveled so far from home for their journey.

**Social interactions.** During the first two weeks after my arrival, I relied so much on my friends back home. I poured out all the little things that happened in my life in the new country and my feelings to them. Sticking with old friends seemed much safer than forming new friendships. As time progressed, I tried to develop new friendships with some of my classmates and other people on different occasions. The social bonds I made here helped me to feel a sense of belonging, especially when I was very homesick. What I would suggest to international students is to not force themselves to be sociable or try to have tons of friends if it doesn't fit with their personality, however, step out of your comfort zone and be open-minded to new friendships and networks. For example, although I would not force myself to attend lots of parties, as that is not a common social activity for Chinese international students, I did enjoy attending other social events on campus or having a ladies night with my friends at local pubs. Being a volunteer is also a great opportunity to meet different people and to learn about local culture and community. School websites and Facebook pages are good places to find information about these opportunities. Another important source is my friends. Sharing information and experiences with friends helped me to keep up with the current situations and gain some useful information about a variety of topics. When I feel stressed about my schoolwork, talking with professors in person also gives me great relief. In most Chinese universities, relationships between professors and students tend to be very formal as professors are authority figures, especially when they are famous and successful in their field. Students may ask some questions during or after the class, but we do not usually meet with the professor off class, while in Canada, relationships between professors and

students tend to be friendlier. Professors in my programme are all caring and approachable to international students, which have made the journey easier.

**Time management.** Arranging time efficiently not only matters to my academic and work performance but also has a huge impact on my quality of life. Scheduling time properly could be difficult for some international students as they may be overwhelmed by the sudden freedom in the new country. For example, Chinese universities usually have a lights-out time (usually from 11 p.m. and 12 p.m. during exam weeks to 6 a.m.) for students living in the dormitory. This helps students to have a regular sleep schedule and to be prepared for morning classes and other activities. While studying in a new country, there are no such restrictions. It is totally up to students to schedule their time. Thus, scheduling one's own time properly seems to be more important for international students to keep themselves on track. As known by many people, a to-do list can be a handy time-management tool. I used to keep a journal, where I could write down small things that happened in my life and a to-do list for the next day. The journal is in Japanese style, which has a unique name, 手帳 (てちょう). People not only write in this journal but also decorate it using tape and coloured pens. It is a great way to relax and calm down at the end of the day. However, writing in the journal became a ritual to me, and it could be time-consuming. More importantly, I didn't refer to the to-do list during the day, as the journal became heavy with so many other contents. My suggestion would be to have a dedicated notebook for to-do list and schedules. Using a phone calendar did not work for me because I do not look at my phone very often during the day, and sometimes I would miss alerts when it was in silent mode. But everyone can have their own personal habits as long as it works for them. Arranging time efficiently, similar to losing weight, is a test of will: You could set up small objectives or even rewards for

yourself every month to encourage yourself. For example, my short-term goals are completing this project and taking the knowledge test for my driver's license; the rewards would be kayaking with my friends on Salt Spring Island. Learning some time management techniques could help international students to balance their lives better and manage their studies with ease.

**Leisure activities.** Once I'd been in the new country a while, I developed new hobbies and favourite leisure activities. I found activities were a great way for me to relieve stress when I had difficulties adjusting. In Victoria, it is easy and enjoyable to experience nature because of the good weather and beautiful scenery. A walk to the beach or a mountain at sunset could not be more rewarding to me. Kayaking became one of my favourite leisure activities, which makes me feel more energetic and peaceful, especially when I am surrounded by beautiful nature and the water, with seals passing by. Sometimes international students tend to be more focused on their studies and have limited their leisure activities. Participating in outdoor activities or developing new hobbies are good ways for international students to reduce tension and will enhance their well-being.

**Family time.** While studying in my host country, my family back home has given me strong emotional support, which to me is even more important than financial support. Although most international students travel alone to their new country, it is really important to keep in touch with family back home. I have video chats with my parents every week. Some of my friends do it daily. Even if there is nothing important or special going on in my life, and most of the time I only report good news, seeing my parents' faces back home is a great relief and a source of strength both for my parents and myself. And I am really grateful that my parents never impose their will on me, rather they respect my life plans. Even though they miss me a lot, they

never pressure me to return home after graduation or ask me to find a certain kind of job. Their understanding and words calm me down during stressful situations. During school breaks or holidays, international students could also visit their family back home. Having quality time with my family and friends back home is really helpful to recharge for future challenges. After the family reunion, I always feel more positive and motivated to face the new semester and life challenges.

**Optimism.** Being optimistic is another of my suggestions for international students, which I think is really important in the adjustment journey. We could choose to see the experience in a new environment positively as an opportunity to explore a new culture and to meet new people. Having an optimistic attitude could encourage us to put our fears aside, to build social connections with the locals, to develop ourselves during the adjustment process, and to believe in our potential strength to grow in the face of difficulties. Studying abroad is like having a long journey away from home for international students, the small and the big accomplishments, as well as the emotional and stressful moments, are all valuable experiences along the path, which will eventually make the journey unique and memorable.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

The present project examined the literature on international students' adjustment issues and provided some practical implications to help universities competently meet the needs of international students and optimize their adjustment. However, the contributions of this project need to be examined in light of its limitations. One of the limitations involves the limited number of studies reviewed due to the time factor. Future research could address this limitation by reviewing a larger amount of representative literature.

Also, most of the literature reviewed targeted American or European universities that have a larger number of international students. However, the cultures of some countries are more difficult to adapt to than those of countries like the U.S. or Canada where the university has already promoted a relatively diverse environment. Future studies could examine international students' adjustment experiences in other host countries. Moreover, most studies targeted non-English speaking international students in English-speaking countries. Studies focused on English-speaking students from Western cultures in non-English-speaking countries would also be valuable to the cross-cultural education.

### **Conclusion**

Every year a growing number of international students, especially from Asian countries, pursue higher education abroad. These groups of sojourners generally experience more adjustment challenges in the new country than their host country counterparts, who mainly experience adjustment to a new learning environment. While many studies have examined the adjustment issues of international students, literature that specifically focused on the role of university support program and services designed to meet the specific needs of international students is not extensive. Some results showed that university support plays an important role in aiding their adjustment process and promoting the psychological well-being of the international students. For the economic and educational benefits of international students to continue, host countries and universities should make more efforts to understand the adjustment challenges and needs of international students and implement and improve available long-term support and services. As McBride says in CBIE's global report on international education in Canada, "With an increasing

number of international students, we need to regularly check in to ensure that they are having an extraordinary experience here” (CBIE, 2014, p.3).

Review results also showed that different factors have a combined effect on international students’ adjustment. Researchers should not view any factor as a sole predictor, but rather take different variables into consideration, especially the cultural impact on international students’ adjustment behaviour. Given these insights, universities should take steps to better aid international students with their adjustment process. It is essential that university personnel become culturally sensitive and aware of the different factors that affect international students’ adjustment and make corresponding modifications in existing university services. These efforts are valuable in making the institution a more welcoming place and community for international students in order to attract more international students. Moreover, universities will help more international students adjust successfully and thus promote their mental and physical wellbeing, and in turn, the university could benefit more from intercultural education and communication and accomplish a multicultural educational environment.

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