

Positive Aspects of Study Abroad Programs in Thailand: Students Perceptions of Events

Douglas Rhein: Mahidol University International College

Abstract: *This article details the positive experiences of sixty international students representing four ethnicities. A qualitative exploration of African American, Burmese, Japanese and Korean students during a short term study abroad program was conducted during 2014-2016. The data were collected through semi-structured one on one interviews and analyzed through a thematic coding system which generated five key issues which were represented most frequently in the discussions with the sixty international student participants, namely; 1) the joy and ease of traveling throughout Thailand, 2) the social situations they found themselves in, 3) life on campus, 4) the quality of the housing and dormitory facilities and 5) the diversity of international students on campus. Each of these themes is discussed with selected quotes from the participants.*

Keywords: *International Students, Adjustment, Thailand, Education, Qualitative*

1. Introduction

A large body of research and anecdotal evidence from international students and sojourners supports the view that adjustment to a foreign country can be problematic and potentially impact psychological and emotional wellbeing. This study adopts a sociocultural adjustment approach model of international student travel due to current study abroad trends in Thailand which are based

on short term study abroad experiences (usually one term or semester) and enrolment in multicultural international settings within the Thai context. While there are many challenges facing Thai higher education, internationalization and the retention of international students has become essential if Thai schools are to continue attracting visiting and exchange students and competing for global ranking internationally.

The purpose of this inquiry is to gain further knowledge of the short term international student adjustment experiences in Thai international higher education. Within the sojourner adjustment paradigm more broadly, the early work of of Lysgaard (1955), Oberg's (1960) and Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963) emphasized stage based models of adjustment. Perhaps the most famous of these models is the U-curve model which describes the initial honeymoon phase, the crisis phase, the recovery phase and finally the adjustment phase. Models such as these and the many variations which emphasized a u-curve theme have been in use for over fifty years and are used in multiple settings including corporate training. However, these models of sequential adjustment have often not been supported by further research. Colleen Ward, who wrote the Sociocultural Adjustment Scale which described a similar U-curve subsequently, observed "The U-curve has been on trial for now for almost 40 years, and the time is long overdue to render a verdict. Despite its popular and intuitive appeal, the U-curve model of sojourner adjustment should be rejected." (Ward et al., 1998, p. 290). Given the unreliability of the U-curve models of adjustment, alternative approaches to adjustment are necessary to understand the sojourner experience. A further rationale for the study of sociocultural adjustment to short term study abroad is that contemporary student sojourners are not in-country for an extended time period which would allow for adaptation or acculturation models of inquiry.

This study responds to the gap in available academic literature in respect to the positive perceptions of study abroad experiences of various ethnic groups within an Asian setting. The focus of this inquiry is on furthering contemporary understanding of the complexities of international student's adjustment experiences, rather than the promotion of the continuation of sequential or stage based models of adjustment. The findings in this study provide a source for critical reflection on the variables which impact adjustment and role of sojourners ethnicity and identity in relation to the perceptions of those ethnicities and identities within the host country. Conducting an inquiry which necessitates critical reflection requires the researcher acknowledge the importance of adopting a social constructivist position which emphasizes the historical and ethnic relationships among the visiting students and the host nationals as most beneficial to understanding the contemporary international student adjustment paradigm.

2. Background

During the 20th century researchers in the field of international education and student adjustment saw the rise of cultural shock theory to the gradual development of multiple stage based theories. From the U-curve model in 1960 to the W-curve in 1963 to the work of Adler (1975), the conceptualization of cross-cultural adjustment was based on models which predicted a typical trajectory sojourners would encounter. While the concept of culture shock continues to be a conceptual and explanatory reality of the experiences of many international students, these models of adjustment have not proven to be as accurate when subjected to empirical testing and research. The approaches to international student adjustment have gradually transitioned from the medical model to the psychological adaptation approach which is more comprehensive and assumes acculturation is

a process which gradually occurs over time as opposed to a shocking state a traveler suddenly finds oneself in. It analyzes the process of actively learning to live in a culture as opposed to reactive subjugation. Early work by Bandura (1977) introduced social learning theory and Hofstede's (1984) work on culture distance began the studies of cultural novelty and adjustment where the greater the difference of culture between the country of origin and the host country, the more difficulty adjustment becomes (Black & Mendenhall, 1991). The dissimilarity of social behavior deemed appropriate at home and in the host country is further support for the degree to which international students experience sociocultural adjustment anxiety and can become an impediment to proper adjustment. However, there is still no single theory which synthesizes relevant research on student adjustment processes. Therefore, education institutions and researchers within this area would benefit if the research were to proceed to identify the positive aspects of the study abroad experience.

Much of the research on international student adjustment between 1996 and 2005 occurred in English speaking universities in the United States, Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and New Zealand (Andrade, 2006). Knowledge and information regarding the variables which influence adjustment to international education in Asia and Thailand is limited, yet teachers and service support staff within higher education institutions need to understand what factors are involved in international student perception of and reaction to Thailand. The previous attempts at reaching conclusive findings regarding the process of adjustment, the special causal relationships of adjustment or the correlational relationships have proven to be problematic. Attempts should be made to avoid the promulgation of one size fits all policies and practices affecting these students. The curve models of adjustment lack support and have been dismissed by many of the leading scholars in adjustment research. These models

do not reflect the reality of the sojourner experience as predictive and are limited in applicability particularly in regard to short term study abroad experiences in Asia.

There remains insufficient attention to the full array of factors involved in positive international student experiences in Thai higher education. Given the wide range of international students Thailand recruits and careful to avoid the homogenization of all international student experiences and adjustment, this research will focus on the experiences of 4 ethnic groups and document their reactions to the circumstances they find themselves in during their 4 month stay. The selection of the 4 ethnicities is intended to provide to a diverse array of opinions and reactions to the sociocultural and education experience in Thai international programs. This research aims to describe the “meaning of the lived experience for several individuals concerning a particular phenomenon” (Creswell, 1998, p. 51) and compare how individuals perceived their adjustment within this context. Improving educational environments for international students and decreasing cross-cultural educational adjustment issues will benefit multiple stakeholders including students, international relations departments and university programs recruiting international students.

3. Methodology

During 2014-2016, a total of sixty participants (fifteen from each of the four ethnic groups) were interviewed. Each of the participants from the four ethnicities chosen for this research was required to meet three criteria: (1) are Japanese, Korean, Burmese or African Americans currently studying at a Thai international college, and (2) do not speak Thai fluently, and (3) enrolled as visiting or exchange students in Thailand for one trimester or approximately 14-16 weeks in country which is the most common length of time for visiting

students in international colleges in Thailand. This is particularly important as historically many international students studied abroad for the duration of their degree, whereas now, many international students are choosing to study only one semester abroad. For example, only 5% of American students study abroad for a full year (Goodman, 2009), thus it is difficult to find access to long term international students in Thailand. The fifteen Japanese, Korean, Burmese and African American international students volunteered after being contacted by the researcher at the international student orientation seminar at the beginning of each academic semester. The Burmese participant's contacted one another following the initial interviews and the establishment of rapport which led to a snowball sampling (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003) effect.

Semi-Structured Interviews

One on one semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. This researcher conducted all of the interviews, transcribed the data and performed the analysis of all interviews. In this sense, the researcher is the primary data instrument. These interviews were semi-structured in that the researcher asked a standard set of questions in order, but used prompts and follow up questions as appropriate and based on the respondents' comments. A semi-structured approach was chosen to maximize participant authenticity. Creating an open discussion assisted in developing genuine or unadulterated descriptions of their adjustment process. The questions were open ended and designed to allow the interviewees to speak freely regarding their experiences. The interviews were conducted in English as all incoming students have passed an English proficiency examination prior to acceptance to this international program. The use of English for interviews is ideal as English is the lingua prima of international schools in Asia and all of the participants have passed a standardized test (IELTS, TOEFL) or

are native English speakers. Interviews lasted approximately 30-45 minutes. This aspect of inquiry emphasized unique attributes which contributed to the experiences of the international students under investigation. Questions were intended to explore participants friendships, perceptions of resilience, the ability to cope with and recover from stress and convert it into a positive experience (Jackson et al., 2007; Richardson, 2002) and students perceptions of adjustment as a result of characteristics (Hunter & Chandler, 1999), internal processes (Tebes et al., 2004) or an innate motivation towards adjustment and growth (Waite & Richardson, 2004).

4. Results:

While a few of the students commented on advantages of international studies such as the potential perception future employers may have or the ability to live abroad independently for a short period of time, there were five key issues which were represented frequently in the discussions with the sixty international student participants, namely; the joy and ease of traveling throughout Thailand, the social situations they found themselves in, life on campus, the quality of the housing and dormitory facilities and the diversity of international students on campus. Each of these will be discussed with selected quotes from the participants.

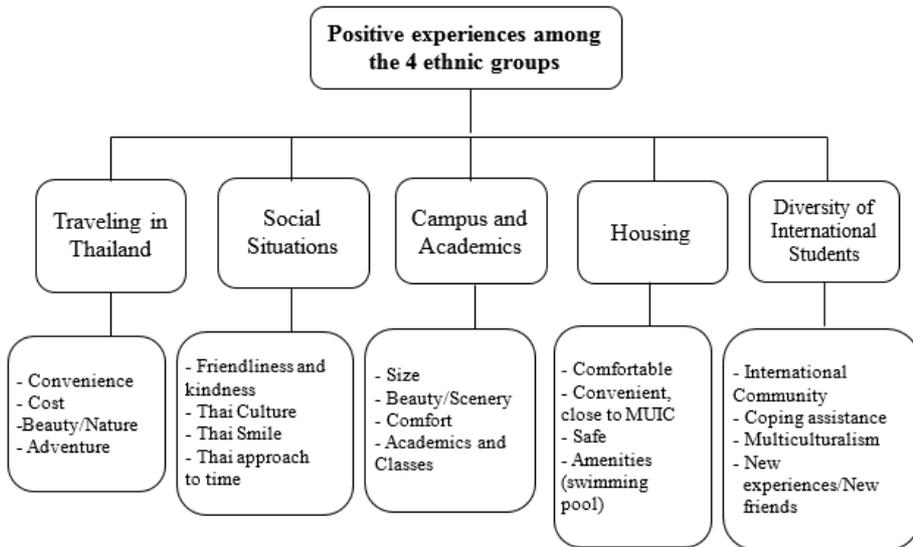


Figure 1. Positive experiences among the 4 ethnicities

Traveling in Thailand

Thailand is a well-known tourist destination. There were over thirty two million visitors in 2016. Boasting an impressive coastline in the south, a large mountain range in the north, well established and varied cuisine, thousands of temples and local markets for shopping, it is not surprising that international students took advantage of what Thailand has to offer in terms of tourism. The 55 out of 60 of the respondents said the most rewarding aspect of studying in Thailand was the opportunity for travel both in Thailand and around the region. All of the participants took at least two trips in Thailand and many, particularly the African American student (hereafter AAS) cohort, travelled five to six times during their three to four month stay in Thailand. The ASS had registered with a student abroad agency in the United States which arranges the housing, student visas, assists

Douglas Rhein

with credit transfers and other related issues and includes local excursions in their fees. The Burmese reportedly travelled the least among the groups in this study with 80% of the participants reporting that they only travelled during field trips or other college related activities. The low cost airlines, availability of public transport, cheap accommodations, easily accessible visa documents and greatly reduced cost of living made both in-country and regional travel a highlight of their study abroad experience. The two questions from the questionnaire by Steele (2008) which elicited the most common positive reactions were:

Would you recommend studying in Thailand to a friend? Why or why not?

What advice would you give someone else who is coming to Thailand to study?

Yui, a Japanese female student remarked:

I would recommend the experience in Thailand. Most Japanese go to American or European schools for study abroad. Thailand is different. It's very special when you compare it to other countries like in Europe or America. When you go to America, to England, to other European countries, your experience is only based on westernized culture and everything is also so civilized. But in Thailand, they still keep a lot of original culture, the festivals, the respect for religion, their heritage is everywhere. You cannot see that in other countries that I could have gone to. When I was at the International Office in Japan I looked at the brochure and Thailand looked the best.

The traditional approach to international education is generally one in which Asians traveled to Western countries which provided

the students with native English speakers and the cultural immersion of living in the West. Today, with the dramatic increase in international programs available globally made possible by the increasing number of expatriate teachers and twinning programs it is impossible for students to attend high quality and less costly international programs in Asian nations such as Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. This also provides international students with access to Thai culture, weather and a great disparity in what was traditionally an extremely expensive overseas experience and which is now essentially cheaper than education at home. For some international students, the money saved from the cost of living in Thailand was reinvested in travel excursions. Emphasizing this point, Hinata, a Japanese male student made a similar comment when he said:

I don't really like cars. I feel sick in cars. So when I stay in Bangkok I can go to the train station and go upcountry without taking busses. I feel good in Bangkok and in the north. It is easy and not expensive when compared to travel in Japan. I travel in Japan too but not so much. Here, you can get a train and a guest house for very little. Here, I travel more but I spend less. So, yes, I would recommend it.

For the international students in this study, traveling throughout Thailand and South East Asia was an eye opening experience and allowed them to engage in activities which are not as accessible in their country of birth. Although travel is not without its dangers, in most cases the respondents often spoke of their positive experiences traveling. For example, Robert, an African American male said:

Yes, definitely. They will meet people and they could talk about what life is like in different places. It's easy to have a different experience here. Like this weekend, I was hitch-hiking and

Douglas Rhein

somebody would pick me up and we talk. Sometimes you can't say exactly what you want because of the language barrier but we are overwhelmed by that. It's just so easy to hitch hike and get around without spending too much and the overall friendliness and the honesty that Thais would offer.

Hitchhiking is neither recommended nor the ideal method of travel for international students and is considered dangerous in the United States. Surprised by this answer, this researcher asked the student if he had ever tried this in the United States and he responded that he had not as it was not a good idea. This was one of many interviews which revealed a reduction of inhibitions and the justification for engagement in unsafe behavior based on the assumption that Thai people are accepting of such travel habits.

When asked what advice you would give to someone, Alexis, an African American female student responded:

Travel when you can. Two days ago we were in the south, seeing tigers, elephants, typical tourist stuff. I really enjoyed it because I did a lot of research before I came here. So some of the things that I saw before in pictures but it's different when you see it for real and up close. I would also say go to temples and anything like that. Now I can say I've been to other countries in Asia and it's so interesting to compare the differences in culture.

Another African American male student, Deion, remarked:

Travel. Get out as much as possible. Last week, I went to Myanmar and I could feel the difference in cultures between Thailand and Myanmar. I really appreciate the development of Thailand because it's quite different in Myanmar. Lots of things are not developed. People are still very poor. The culture is strong and I like the life style they enjoy but it's not very convenient. Bangkok and traveling around Thailand is convenient but Myanmar is more like a

real travel experience that I won't forget. I don't travel like this in the States. It's not as exciting and the people are really similar in most places...plus, it's too expensive unless you know somebody who will let you stay on their couch.

The cultures of Myanmar and Thailand are vastly different and it is this experience and the resulting understanding of the cultural diversity in South East Asia which lends to the overall enjoyment of international study experiences in Thailand. All of the groups favored traveling with their compatriots and often in groups, yet the African Americans were most vocal about their experiences in other ASEAN nations. The Koreans and Japanese also took advantage of the tourism aspects of their student abroad experiences.

A Korean male student, Jun-Ho, commented:

I want to recommend them (friends from home) to come here just because what Thailand offers overall. I mean you can see so much in just one country. If you go to the North you will have a completely different experience than if you go to the islands or to farms or the old capital in Ayutthaya.

Eun-Mi, a Korean female student responded:

Korean-exchange students here, we really enjoy the time we study and when we travel around Thailand. We stick together when we study and when we travel.

Given the history of South Korea with the Japanese occupation and the subsequent war from 1950-1953 it is not surprising that many of the historic monuments and shrines to the Korean dynasties of the past have all but disappeared. Very little architectural evidence remains of the Three Kingdoms of early Korean history. However, even with the Japanese occupation of Thailand during the Second World War this architectural devastation has not occurred to the same

Douglas Rhein

degree. While Thailand was invaded numerous times and the capitals of previous Thai Kingdoms were sacked, looted and burned, there is still a great deal of historical sites and buildings throughout the Kingdom today. Travelers to the various regions of previous Thai kingdoms can still see the architectural treasures along the city's main thoroughfares. This is evident in many of Thailand's main tourist areas such Chiang Mai, Lopburi, Sukhothai and Ayutthaya.

A Burmese female student, Nan, commented:

Some of us travel a lot and some of us often stay in Bangkok, which is my case. Even when I stay in Bangkok I take day trips to places. I just travelled to Ayutthaya and it was great to go and come back in one day. The history of Burma and Ayutthaya is important here and it was something I was told to see. I'm happy I did because it was really great to know the background and culture there.

While it would be ideal if all of the international students had an interest in history and exploration of culture, there were many who travelled strictly for leisure. This aspect of travel in Thailand was equally represented among the participants in this study.

Aoi, a Japanese female student said:

I like to travel in Japan. I think it is easier there but more adventurous here. Last weekend I had travelled to Koh Pha-Ngan. It was fun because we did a plane, then a bus then a boat then a bus again...hahaha, it was really, really tiring but worth it when you see the beach and the bungalows right next to the water.

When asked the same question regarding the advice she would give to someone coming to study in Thailand, an African American female, Jayla, commented:

I would say be careful with time. Yes. I just talked to my friends, the other international students in classes, and we would make plans a lot. I wanted to join other groups but I didn't have time at all because if you want to travel like this you are often not on campus on weekends so you miss a lot of the parties and everything. The other exchange students are traveling in groups too so we all have our groups and then we're gone. You also have to remember to study. It gets so easy travelling that you fall behind in class. So yeah, I definitely don't have time for much during the week.

A Burmese male, Htay, who generally had many negative comments about his experience studying in Thailand, shared this comment regarding his travel experiences:

It's a totally different experience from what I thought it would be. When I travel compared to what I feel as an exchange student. When I go on campus as an exchange here I just study and go back to the dorms to hang out with the other international students but when I travel I can get to know much more of the styles of the residents and why they do something; why they are different from us; why do they choose to live with that style. So it's quite....how to say...it's good for me because I can understand apart from the civilized lifestyle in big cities, some people still choose to keep their tradition, enjoy their lives by balancing the culture and balancing the development of the country. Travel helped me know that Bangkok is not Thailand. In Bangkok it's just about money, status, what you look like, but once you get out of the city you see that most Thais are not like that. So, for anybody coming here, my advice is get out of Bangkok whenever you can see the real Thailand.

Overall, the ease and comfort of travel was the most rewarding aspect of the international students experience during their study abroad. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons the Thai economy

relies on tourism and has invested heavily in the infrastructure necessary to maintain this aspect of its culture.

Social Situations

The second most commonly discussed aspect that the participants discussed in positive terms was the unique situations they encountered. Many of the participants had not studied abroad prior to their experience in Thailand and were not expecting Thai society and culture to be so impressively different from that of their homeland. The interview questions which elicited the most comments in this regard were as follows:

What have been the most important adjustment issues or situations you have encountered during your stay? How has this influenced your experience here?

What have you learned from being an international student in Thailand that can help you in the future?

A common response both of these questions was a reference to the Thai smile or the local approach to time management and avoidance of stress. These are locally celebrated characteristics of Thai culture but are perhaps not as well known in other countries. It is these same qualities which create often ambivalent reactions to the international students' experiences interacting with Thais. As will be noted later, the Thai smile can be interpreted in many ways, as too can the desire to avoid conflict. Therefore, these facets of local behavior are both positive and negative depending on the situation and the cultural background of the participants and their perception of appropriate social norms.

For instance, Jin-Woo, Korean male responded:

People are more open here. At least in public, like at the market, more people smile and talk to each other. Sometimes it seems like everyone knows each other even when I think they have never met.

This sentiment was often observed among the participants. In many cultures, there is not the same degree of openness. In many parts of Thailand, one is expected to smile while engaging in a commercial transaction even one as small as buying fruit in the market. Thai culture often prides itself on its social openness, friendliness and the smile. The Ministries of Tourism and Culture annually distribute numerous brochures on Thailand all of which inevitably include the picture of people helping each other with a broad smile to indicate the seemingly selfless nature of Thai culture.

Brianna, an African American female student, said:

I think the Thai smile is genuine. Even when they are shying away from me, I think the smile is genuine; they're just not sure what to do.

There are many aspects of Thai culture which influenced the experiences of participants. Issues such as conflict avoidance and collectivism were often discussed in the interviews but far more common was the positive aspects of life in Thailand. The most common point addressed regarding cultural adjustment was a consistent reference to Thai kindness and safety. To illustrate, Kaito, a Japanese male student said:

The Thais are really nice and I like them. They treat me like family which is great. I feel safe here. I feel fine on campus.

Akari, a Japanese female student, said:

I think if you go talk to them by yourself they are really friendly and they are very welcome...and most people here, I think most Thai

Douglas Rhein

people, like Japanese culture and Japan...I really feel comfortable in that way...they are really welcome about Japanese stuff and people so I feel not that easy but I'm glad to go to talk to them.

An African American female student, Aisha, commented:

All the Americans are really overwhelmed by the small things Thai people do. They've been saying Thai people are so nice and the culture is amazing and awesome and like just the way people help each other and like just the friendliness or the way the Thai people are. We are really shocked by that and often comparing this to our home.

An African American male, Malik, said:

Everything happens when they want it to happen. I can take that back and use it in my life because America is crazy and chaotic. The fact that they're all so nice is different. I mean, they're very nice. They're very welcoming and the culture would be the main thing I'll take back. It's a great culture.

There was a strong appreciation for Thai culture and many of the social situations the international students experienced. As noted above, this was significant to the African American students who had never experienced a collectivist culture. Given the individualistic culture of these students homeland, they often reported how calm, peaceful and 'mellow' the locals were in public. The other often repeated facet of Thai society which proved influential for many of the students related to the local attitude of time. Many cultures have significantly different approaches to time and the need to follow or maintain a schedule. Thailand is a past oriented culture; whereas, the United States, Korea and Japan are future oriented and place far more importance on the value of time and the need to observe schedules. The appropriate arrival time for an appointment, for example, is viewed differently depending on culture. In Thailand, being late for

an appointment is not considered rude or insulting. Most Thais have a flexible notion of time and arriving after the agreed upon time does not require an explanation or apology. In most situations, punctuality is not seen as a necessity in Thailand. This can be observed in many situations and social aspects. An example of this which was noticed by many of our students was train schedules and assignment deadlines, both of which are more or less perceived as guidelines as opposed to rules from the Thai perspective. In Japan, Korea and the United States assignments are due at a specific time and there are often serious penalties for late submission. This is also true of public transportation schedules which, in the above countries, one can often set their watch to. In Thailand it is not uncommon for a train to be many hours late. This is also true of submitting an assignment where Thai teachers are often seen as kind for taking a flexible approach to deadlines.

An African American male, Robert, said:

Well, definitely things are a lot more relaxing here. Things back home, everything is so punctual. You have to be on time with everything. Every assignment or every quiz and exam must be done on time. A minute passed and they would be like 'no, I won't accept it'. Here everything is a lot more relaxing. There is no actual time. You can say to someone 5 o'clock and they show up at 5.30. Back home if you say 5 o'clock it means 5 o'clock on the dot. Here there is a time difference and the lifestyle is more relaxing compared to the states.

An African American female, Destiney, responded:

At home we are always being punctual and stuff like that, well I think the life here is probably the same with Boston; but it's a lot more relaxing and the lifestyle is more mellow. Back home you kind of, like, you have people arguing with you 24/7. Well, we have the definition of an a**hole back home(Hahaha), I don't know how to

Douglas Rhein

explain it because it's Boston! Here you just don't have that attitude of fighting and arguing and debating everyone. People are just mellow about everything. Back home, if you show up late people will say something and call you out on it. People in the US don't get offended easily but they have conflicts easily and they argue. With my Thai friends, we don't argue about anything.

Echoing his statement regarding the ease of avoiding conflicts, one Korean male, Sung-Min, said:

I feel great here. I feel like everybody is great. I didn't fight with anybody or have any problems with Thais. I travel, eat out and study without anything. Life here is so simple. There's no pressure. At home I have stress.

Japan is a particularly time conscious country and the Japanese place great importance on time management and the observation of agreed upon schedules. Aitsuki, a Japanese male student observed her reaction to this change in culture when she said:

A really great difference here is the freedom. You can do things when you want and they don't get a penalty. In class, people walk in late and the teacher doesn't get angry. I know students do paper late the teacher accepts it. You can't do this in Japan. We have rules.

It should be noted that this aspect of adjustment to Thailand was rarely mentioned among the Burmese students. The only comment from a Burmese participant regarding this facet of Thai culture was when one female Burmese student, MyatNoe, commented:

We like to do things on time but we are not strict about it. Some of the other international students talk about this but I don't really think about it.

The Korean, Japanese American attitude towards time places pressure on the students to abide by the schedules and this is a valued

characteristic within that culture. However, the combination of Thai social expectations and a lack of adherence to schedules led many of the international students to come to the conclusion that life is easier in Thailand. While these students have made a subjective observation as there are many other aspects to life in Thailand, there are differences in the culture of time which apparently reduced stress levels for the participants in this study. For those international students from future-oriented time cultures, there was a clear sense of relief or reduction in anxiety in regard to assignments and appointments. In these particular situations, the cultural difference worked to their favor.

Life on Campus and in the Classroom

The interview questions which elicited the most comments in this regard were as follows:

Please describe your impression of this program and of Thailand. Describe the programs/services/people you turn to most frequently for a) personal matters and b) academic matters.

An African American male, Elon, responded:

My first impression is just about being in Bangkok. Bangkok is huge, really, really, much bigger than Boston or other cities I've been to in the United States. I didn't expect it to be so modern. The streets are interesting and crowded and there's a lot of different districts that are different. So I'm little bit lost in Bangkok but I'm living here now and I like it. MUIC it is a very good environmental for learning I don't know if it is about the weather or the place is huge but we have a plan or a map to know where we are which is clear. You can get lost on campus and it's hot when we walk around during the day but at night it's great. So much better than a Boston winter.

Douglas Rhein

Another African American female, Kamari, reported:

The environment is great and I have been welcomed here by a few staff in the International Affairs Office which is very great. They assist us for everything and they told us what to do, where to go...the organization is very great because in the US it is very different for international students. They are lost for everything and when they come to our school nobody can answer them in their own language so it's very different and I'm very lucky to be here.

The organizational support for the international students is well developed and most of the students are met at the airport upon arrival by the college van which will then take them directly to the dormitory or apartments. The international students are also given multiple orientation seminars which discuss some of the issues previous students have encountered such as snake or dog bites, safety, internet access, traveling in Thailand and shopping and public transport issues. The newly arrived international students are also given a walking tour around the campus to introduce the facilities.

Reo, a Japanese male student, responded

I think the school is really big. I come from a primary university in a city, so the international campus and how big it is really overwhelmed me at first, but I know it now. It's really natural compared to my school. Before I came here I just thought that MUIC is a small program but now I know it's on the Mahidol campus so it really is big.

A Burmese male, Aung zue, had a similar comment:

It's a huge campus and most of the time the international students are confined to just a few buildings so that is easy. It's nice to have classes in different buildings to get different feels of the environment. As I said, most of the exploration of the campus that I've done is just

me walking around, looking around. There's all these different monuments you can walk around and see when you have time.

The size and scenery of the campus was commented on by nearly all of the participants when asked to describe their impressions of Thailand and the program. Given the tropical nature of Thai climate, many of the students took advantage of the air conditioned areas in the International Building and spent additional time in the library. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of their study abroad experience, when on campus, was the campus itself. This sentiment was summarized when an African American male, Elon, articulated the following:

I would say that is my most memorable experience in Thailand. I really like walking around the campus to look at how much effort they put in and how much beauty there is around the campus. That would be the thing I will miss the most because I don't get that back in my home university. I think that would probably be the most memorable thing, you know. Especially when it comes to evening time and I'm walking out, there's the sun set coming down and I can see everything around. It's really a beautiful campus.

Another African American male, Robert, responded:

I paid everything from my pocket to get here. My parents didn't really help me. I am happy I am getting my moneys' worth here. I'm definitely in love with this place and all. On campus, they provide a lot of natural fields to all and there's a lot of places to play soccer or just walk around. Plus, I definitely enjoy the food. The food is much better than in the states and it only costs about a dollar for a full meal. It's much cheaper than studying and living back home and because now I'm not working here I have a lot more free time to enjoy the whole thing. Overall, I had a real good experience.

Douglas Rhein

While the participants often commented on the campus there were other aspects to life at the international college which also required adjustment. The academic environment was described in ambivalent terms. The positive aspects of this often related to the participants gaining some insight into the culture and then comparing this to their homeland. Many of the participants remarked that simply observing the typical Thai students behavior was enough to make them consider their own behavior and personal motivations in the academic setting. Much of this was related to Thai culture and the delicate balancing of westernization and Thainess. The Thai education promotes Thai values in clear and obvious ways which involve the international students. Upon arriving in Thailand the international students are given an orientation on Thai manners and customs and then taken to a clothing store to purchase the university uniform. All students in Thailand are expected to wear this when on campus. The uniform consists of black shoes and pants for men or skirts for women and a white button down shirt. The university pin must be fixed to the shirt and there is also a university ID badge which is expected to be visible at all times. These students are asked to participate in Thai ceremonies such as “wai kru” where the students are asked to prostrate themselves at the feet of their teachers and show respect. The international students are also taught Thai greetings (the wai) and told to respect the social status of the Thais with whom they are speaking to. Many of the participants commented on how they appreciate the Thai adherence to their culture and value system. Many who thought they would not accept certain aspects of student life in Thailand were surprised at how easily they adapted themselves and were able to adjust to some of the practices which they thought would be more problematic. One comment which emphasized this perspective of the positive and negative aspects of the Thai educational culture came from a Korean female, Soo-Mi, who said:

Well, this is my first time actually in Thailand and so my first time studying in Thailand, so definitely it was a culture shock for me. The school environment took me a few weeks to adjust to and the school environment, especially the uniform, because I'm not used to wearing it so that is different. Overall, after getting used to it, I really like the program and the school. I feel like it's easier here and the program itself really works so I'm happy with everything other than some of the Thailand stuff but it's not bad, you just have to accept it for what it is and this isn't Korea.

Some aspects of the Thai educational culture such as the uniform provided the students with an adjustment challenge which they found easy to overcome. Other challenges such as finding one's way around campus and navigating the large international buildings were also overcome. One advantage of the study abroad experience the students in this study commented on was the opportunity to participate in a multicultural learning environment and to become aware of their own cultural strengths and weaknesses. The experience presented a situation where they needed to develop their intercultural competence to succeed.

Ichika, a Japanese female student said:

I like the school. I think it's pretty good. I just have a hard time with some of the classes because it's very different. It's not the subject I find difficult but the way they lecture or give examples and there is almost no homework so I don't know what to study sometimes. I think overall it is pretty good. It was more than I was expecting. I think the level of education is quite good compared to other places I hear about in Thailand. Plus, they have a lot of foreign teachers here. I have four classes this term and my professors are all from different countries so I get used to different accents and teaching styles which I wouldn't get back home. Plus I'm usually

Douglas Rhein

the only Japanese in the class so I'm listening to a European teacher and surrounded by mostly Thais and Westerners.

Housing

Most students used agents to organize their housing and did not stay in the on-campus dormitory. Instead the agents organize more expensive housing located in apartments between one and two kilometers from the campus. These apartments have swimming pools, exercise facilities, restaurants, cleaning services and a shuttle bus network which operates from 8a.m. to 8p.m. The majority of participants reported that they were very happy with their living arrangements and were often more comfortable with their room in Thailand than in their home country. The other international services and facilities such as health services were less frequently commented on. The housing provided for students is, in general, larger than the participants were expecting. Most of the housing placements include facilities and amenities not commonly available on most college campuses. The college offers a variety of apartments and houses with both single and shared accommodations. The shared rooms are about \$100 to \$120 a month and most of the complexes include private swimming pools, kitchen areas, 24 hour security, washing machine services, exercise facilities and a shuttle bus service to and from the college on regular intervals from 7 a.m. until 6:30p.m. Due to the size of the campus and the number of faculty and students who live in the area, there are a number of shopping malls, movie theatres, public parks, 7 Elevens and supermarkets which cater to the university and local community. Given the relatively low cost of living in Thailand, students were often pleasantly surprised at the value for money they received regarding housing, food and transport. The interview questions which elicited the most comments in this regard were as follows:

Where do you live? How is it? Does this affect your adjustment at all? How?

The responses were overwhelmingly positive. Most students had nothing but positive comments regarding this aspect of their experience in Thailand. When there were problems they were the result of misunderstandings among the residents or language proficiency as opposed to issues regarding the facilities or management of the housing units.

A Korean female, Hyun-Mi, commented:

It's secure and the house is in the back of the street so it's quiet. You have a roommate which is normal. Everyone shares a kitchen. The culinary area is usually full with people going in and out. There is a cleaner who is always there and helping. It's fine...everything is easy.

Haru, a Japanese male said:

You can say it's like an apartment. It kind of feels like a community, but yeah, it feels nice. I really feel comfortable. I'm not very into so many people but for me living with several people is a big chance and a big change. I wanted to do something different when I decided to study here. Sometimes I feel comfortable sometimes not, but it's because of all of the people, not the apartment. The apartment is quite good.

A Burmese female, Maya, commented:

The van is great, especially in the morning. We don't want to take the taxi to go to school a lot so we use the van when we are on time. The room is good. We swim almost every day and it feels like a community or like the United Nations cause there are so many of us and the exchange students from other apartments visiting us a lot. It feels like a close community. The food is okay we have our kitchen

Douglas Rhein

so we can cook everything. We have some good street food and it is cheap so we don't have to worry about anything when we are home.

Hana, a Japanese female student responded:

Yeah, I'm happy about it. There are a lot of exchange students and they are staying at my dormitory so I meet them every day. My friends are also good. I feel comfortable; I feel safe; I feel it is a home. In Japan I always stay in an apartment, but here I think it's great because it's like a big house.

Diversity of Students

The experiences described above are clearly beneficial to the international students in this research. An integral aspect of study abroad programs takes place in the consciousness of the visiting students. The students' ability to learn and develop intercultural competence can be a great benefit to their careers and further studies. The cultural, linguistic and ethnic diversity of students encourages students to learn and adapt themselves in ways that they had not anticipated and yet often found fulfilling. Similar to the four previous positive aspects of the study abroad experience, this aspect of adjustment, international student diversity, was also one which was considered a highlight of the experience and a source of stress which required the development of coping strategies. In this section, the positive aspects of the experience will be described.

There are many programs in Thailand which have established exchange programs and visiting student partnerships with schools in Asia and North America. The exchange agreements are based on the premise that over a period of time, generally 3-5 academic years, the number of students a school receives from a particular program abroad will be equal to the number of students that school sends to that particular program abroad. However, many Thai international

colleges receive far more students than they send out. Many of the Thai students choose not to go abroad for various reasons and yet many of the students from abroad choose to study at in Thailand for the reasons discussed in this article. This creates a problem with the maintenance of long term exchange programs and has led to the establishment of a greater number of the visiting student agreements. The international colleges continue to expand partnerships with international student agencies. This has translated into an increase in the number of visiting students over the past ten years. Visiting students may choose to go through a study abroad program or apply directly. In cases where the students choose a study abroad program much of the planning is done for them and the agent, which acts as a liaison between the home university and the Thai program for logistics such as credit transfer, course offerings, housing and insurance. In cases where students apply directly, the International Relations Department of the College will assist with relevant matters described above. These students, plus the full time international students leads to the creation of a multicultural environment.

The interview questions which elicited the most comments in this regard were as follows:

Are there any programs/services that we could offer that would better help international students?

What have you learned from being an international student in Thailand that can help you in the future?

A Burmese male, Smith, responded to this facet of the experience with the following comment:

I wish there was a buddy system, I know some students found Thai friends but I never received a buddy so I only hung out with the other international students. At first I was really disappointed. But

Douglas Rhein

now I am actually thinking that I know a lot about Germans and African Americans now. I never knew any before but I talked to them at parties and they introduced me to their friends and now we are in a group. Before I came I was thinking I would learn Thai and spend all my time with Thais but actually I spend most of my time with Americans which is also different. Now I'm curious so I'm thinking about going there for a semester.

A Korean female, Sung-Shil, said:

Ok, at first I used the international relations office so often. Anything I have to do like for printing or other programs and services here like accounting, banking, and so on. Now it is not so much. I can do a lot by myself or I can ask my roommates and they can help me. Most of us have the same problems with exchanging money or Wi-Fi passwords or something we need. We help each other.

A common observation among the participants in this study was the development of a sense of camaraderie among the international students. They often lived together, studied together, travelled together and eventually partied together. The bonds developed by this cohort were often stronger than the bonds with the host nationals.

When asked the first question regarding the development of programs or services, Deion, an African American male observed:

Yeah, maybe but I think most people are comfortable with people from a similar background. The exchange students are from all over but we all have something in common. The only problems we all have are related to school. Everything outside the school is fine. Especially when, because we live with the other exchange students we go out and we travel around, we talk a lot of living in different countries and states. I'm from the East coast and I really didn't know much about the North West until my housemate told me about it. So we have people you can relate to. It makes it way easier. Everybody is on the same boat.

When asked about what the students learned from the experience that can help them in the future, Niko a Japanese female student made the following observation:

I think I learned that not everyone is going to do it the way we think. There are many examples of living with Americans and Europeans and they do things that Japanese don't do. It isn't wrong but it was a shock the way people live or act different. After a few months, now I know they do it like that at home so it is normal for them.

Haruto, a Japanese male study had this to say about what he had learned during his international experience in Thailand:

I recognize my friends are probably going to say the same thing and basically we are all in small clusters here. Some of them may say that they talk to Thais and they really feel the same way I do and Yeah! Most of us want to think we get the Thai experience but we get the foreigner experience in Thailand. I don't really talk to the Thai. I only talk with my roommates. One or two of Thai people, not more than that and they are international students who have lived in different countries so I don't think they are normal Thai. After class, they are in small groups. Sometimes I'm the only Japanese person in the class. So I'm just alone. One of my classes is like that. So after class I want to go back to my room and talk with other people...the exchange students. So now I know what a foreigner feels like. In Japan we also are like this to the foreigners in our class.

A Korean male, Tae-Min, echoed these sentiments when he said:

Yes. We are all friends. I mean the visiting students. We are all different but always include the others. We don't leave people alone at the dorms or let them go shopping alone. I think it's a gap. There is a gap between us and Thais...but I don't know if it's bad or maybe it's the same in Korea for foreigners because I'm Korean in Korea.

Douglas Rhein

We are the same. I don't know foreigners in Korea. But it's very different here. I have lots of friends...all are people who I study in the exchange program with.

These comments reflect many possibilities of personal or cognitive change. Like other international students who had not traveled abroad or had only been on short holidays in tourist destinations, many of the students commented on the outsider or immigrant experience. They often recognized that they, as international students, are different and will be treated differently in both positive and negative ways. This understanding allowed for further reflection of how immigrants are treated in their homeland and how participants are now more cognizant of the minority perspective as a result of their study abroad experience. This was particularly common among the Koreans and the Japanese participants who, having come from far more homogenous societies than the Burmese and African Americans, were, often for the first time, minorities.

5. Discussion

International student relevance to higher education is increasing due to their ability to contribute economically through often exorbitant tuitions rates at many schools, their ability to enrich the cultural diversity of the classroom and campus, and their ability to assist in the development of intercultural competence for all involved; yet, many international students struggle with their pursuit on an international degree (Ozturgut & Murphy, 2009). The majority of research involving international students is conducted in Western nations. However, given the rapid expansion of internationalization

in Thai higher education, it has become important to gain further insight into the adjustment demands faced by various groups of students enrolling in Thai international programs. The primary purpose of this research is to explore an area of education where limited knowledge exists, namely, four ethnicity groups international students adjustment to Thai higher education. There remains insufficient attention to the full array of factors involved in international student adjustment to schools in Asia but this exploratory analysis does lend to further understanding of Japanese, Korean, African American and Burmese student experiences in Thai international programs. The purpose is to create knowledge and assist the fields of psychology and education. Improving educational environments for international students and decreasing cross-cultural educational adjustment issues will benefit multiple stakeholders including students, international relations departments and university programs recruiting international students. This research attempts to contribute to the growing area of knowledge on international students adjustment research and adjustment theory as it pertains to the conflicting models as proposed by Lysgaard (1955), Oberg (1960), Gullahorn and Gullahorn (1963), Brown (1980), Adler (1975), Torbiorn (1994), Mohamed (1997) and Ward (1996). An investigative analysis of student adjustment can be further utilized in areas within the host country as well as in orientation sessions prior to student departure from their home country. Additionally, the process of eliminating or decreasing stressors should create a more positive learning and travel experience for our inbound students.

6. Conclusion

As the number of visiting and exchange students continues to rise Asia as a whole and Thailand in particular, international colleges in the region are in a unique position to capitalize on the tourism infrastructure, the relatively low cost of living and tuition, the quality

Douglas Rhein

of international housing and the ability to offer English language education. If the political and social stability remain consistent, Thailand can take advantage of this unique position and continue to recruit large numbers of visiting students, decrease the sociocultural stressors while also increasing the rate of international student retention.

Thai institutions benefit from the influx of international students in many ways. The social and economic implications of increasing international students in Thailand should not go unnoticed. Further efforts should be made to improve the visibility of Thailand as a destination for international students. Marketing materials which highlight the positive aspects of this experience, as detailed above, should include photographs of the campus and apartment facilities while also informing potential students of the costs involved. The quality of services and accommodations, availability of travel and adventure and relatively low cost are surely features of international study abroad programs which would entice students. These features, along with the improvement of host national and international student contact, are important defining features of the higher education market. These signify a possibility for Thailand to market itself as a study abroad destination. While not everyone adjusts to new environments the students in this study did find comfort during their sojourn in Thailand. It is clear that not everyone wants to adjust to every facet of the Thai experience, yet from the cognitive perspective, the international students

References:

Adler, P. (1975). The transitional experience: An alternative view of cultural shock. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 15(4), 13-23.

- Andrade, M. (2006). International students in English-speaking universities: Adjustment factors. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 5(2), 131-154.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Black, J.S. & Mendenhall, M. (1991) The U-curve adjustment hypothesis revisited: A review and theoretical framework. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 22(2), 225-247.
- Brown, H.D. (1980). The optimal distance model of second language acquisition. *TESOL Quarterly*, 14(2), 157-164.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gullahorn, E., & Gullahorn, T. (1963). An extension of the U-curve hypothesis. *Journal of Social Issues*, 19(3), 33-47.
- Hofstede, G. (1984). Cultural dimensions in management and planning. *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, 1(2), 81-99.
- Hunter, A. J., & Chandler, G. E. (1999). Adolescent resilience. *Image: Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 31(3), 243-247.
- Jackson, D., Firtko, A., & Edenborough, M. (2007). Personal resilience as a strategy for surviving and thriving in the face of workplace adversity: A literature review. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 60(1), 1-9.
- Lysgaard, S. (1955). Adjustment in a foreign society: Norwegian Fulbright grantees visiting the United States. *International Social Science Bulletin*, 7, 45-51.
- Mohamed, O. (1997). Counselling for excellence: Adjustment development of Southeast Asian students. In D. McNamara, & R. Harris (Eds.), *Overseas students in higher education: Issues in teaching and learning*. London: Routledge.
- Oberg, K. (1960). Culture shock: Adjustments to new cultural environments. *Practical Anthropology*, 7(4), 177-182.

- Ozturgut, O., Murphy, C. (2009). Literature vs. practice: Challenges for international students in the U.S. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 2(3) 374-385.
- Richardson, G.E. (2002). The metatheory of resilience and resiliency. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58(3), 307-321.
- Steele, D. (2008). Perceptions of Chinese international students in Singapore: Adjustment issues and support (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada.
- Tebes, J.K., Irish, J.T., Puglisi-Vasquez, M.J., & Perkins, D.V. (2004). Cognitive transformation as a marker of resilience. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 39(5), 769–788.
- Torbiorn, I. (1994). Dynamics of cross-cultural adaptation. In G. Althen (Ed.), *Learning across cultures*. New York: NAFSA.
- Waite, P. J., & Richardson, G. E. (2004). Determining the efficacy of resiliency training. *Journal of Allied Health*, 33(3), 178-183.
- Ward, C. (1996). Acculturation. In D. Landis and R.S. Bhagat (Eds.), *Handbook of intercultural training* (2nd ed., pp. 124-147). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications
- Ward, C., Okura, Y., Kennedy, A., & Kojima, T. (1998). The u-curve on trial: A longitudinal study of psychological and sociocultural adjustment during cross-cultural transition. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 22(3), 277