

# FACTOR OF ACCULTURATION AND ITS MANAGEMENT WITH FOREIGN STUDENTS

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**Abstract.** The tertiary education of Latvia faces new challenges and dimensions in its development and sustainability one of which is the welcoming of foreign students. Their level of acculturation is the main issue for the given article. The reasons of the phenomenon of acculturation are evaluated and the forms of it -integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization and their possible solutions are discussed. The existing experiences of the students are also explored. Culture shock is described from different viewpoints: from that of foreign students studying in Latvia and from that of Latvian students returning after a study semester or two abroad. Within the paper conclusions and recommendations for overcoming culture shock will be proposed

**Key words:** Acculturation, assimilation, integration, separation, marginalization

It is generally accepted that intercultural communication creates stress for most individuals. The individuals who engage in intercultural contacts for extended periods of time will respond to the stress in different ways. Most of them will incorporate at least some behaviours from the new culture into their own behaviour. But there are some that take on the characteristics, the norms, and even the values and beliefs of another culture willingly and easily. However, there are many who resist the new culture and retain their old ways, sometimes choosing to spend time in enclaves populated only by others like themselves. And very seldom there are some who simply find the problems of adjusting to a new culture to be intolerable, and they leave if they can.

People's reactions also change over time. That is, the initial reactions of acceptance or rejection often shift as increased contacts produce different kinds of outcomes. Such changes in the way people react to intercultural contacts are called *adaption*. For any different behaviour there is needed a certain time of adaption called period of adaptation. For some it is very short, for some it never ends. Thus the foreign students coming to study in host country sometimes adjust very fast. It depends on how big is the basic difference between their own culture expressions: beliefs, values, history, time and space perceptions, and so on. The shorter the period of their stay in the host country for study time is, the more they appreciate it. If the foreign students have chosen longer period of stay there may appear a kind of fall back in their adaptation behaviour. Sometimes these are everyday habits of the host country people that annoy or irritate the representatives of the other culture, sometimes it is simply the language barrier for everyday purposes. Students know fairly well the language of the subjects studied, but fail during the everyday intercourse because of locals using their native language not some international language that is used during the studying process. Words such as *assimilation*, *adjustment*, *acculturation*, and even *coping* are used to

describe how individuals respond to their experiences in other cultures. Many of the terms refer to how people from one culture react to prolonged contact with those from another.

Over the years, different emotional overtones have been attached to those terms. To some people, for instance, *assimilation* is a negative outcome; to others it is positive.

Some consider *adjustment* to be „good”, whereas for others it is „bad”. Anyone has to make one’s own value judgement about what constitutes the right kind of outcome. The competent adjustment to another culture will vary greatly from situation to situation and from person to person. There is used the broader term of *adaption* to characterize these adjustments because it subsumes various forms of cultural or individual adaption. ‘*Adaption is the process by which people establish and maintain relatively stable, helpful and mutually shared relationships with others upon relocating to an unfamiliar cultural setting.*’ The definition is modified from one proposed by Young Yun Kim. (Gudykunst, Mody, 2002; Kim, 2001). This definition suggests that when individuals adapt to another culture they must learn how to ‘fit’ themselves into it. Different individuals and different groups will make the fit in different ways. Adaptation includes physical, biological, and social changes.

Physical changes occur because people are confronted with new physical stimuli – they eat different food, drink different water, live in different climates, and reside in different kinds of housing. These things are adapted differently also referring to the age of people under discussion. The older the person is the more obstacles he or she will find in the route of adaptation to different culture. When people are exposed to a new culture, they may undergo actual physical and biological changes. Especially if that is connected with time zone difference. People from USA or Canada when coming to Europe will suffer more discomfort as the people from European countries visiting USA or Canada. People deal with new viruses and bacteria; new foods cause new reactions and perhaps even new allergies. Social relationships change with the introduction of new people. Outgroups may become bonded with ingroups, for example, in opposition to the new outgroup members. Such changes may also cause individuals to define themselves in new and different ways. (Berry, Kim, Boski, 1988). Alternatively, the culture itself might change because of the influence of people from other cultures.

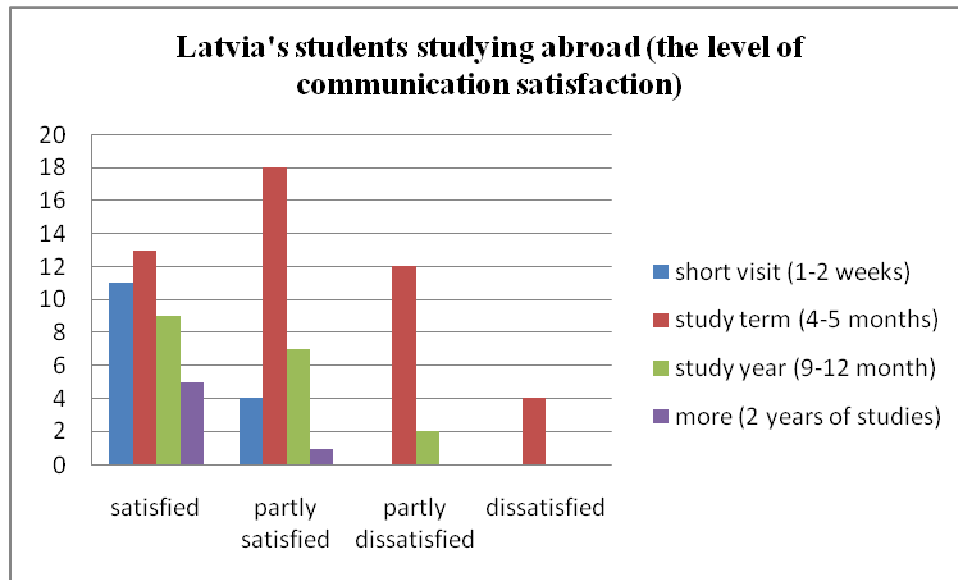
Sustained intercultural contact that requires total immersion in another culture may produce a phenomenon that has sometimes been called *culture shock*. Culture shock is formed by the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse. These signs or cues include the thousand and one ways in which we orient ourselves to the situations of daily life: when to shake hands and what to say when we meet people, when and how to give tips, how to

give orders to servants, how to make purchases, when to accept and when to refuse invitations, when to take statements seriously and when not. Now these cues, which may be words, gestures, facial expressions, customs, or norms, are acquired by all of us in the course of growing up and are as much a part of our culture as the language we speak or the beliefs we accept. All of us depend for our peace of mind and our efficiency on hundreds of these cues, most of which we are not consciously aware. (Oberg, 1960). Things taken for granted at home require virtually constant monitoring in the new culture to assure some degree of understanding. The loss of predictability, coupled with fatigue that results from the need to stay consciously focused on what would normally be taken for granted, produces the negative responses associated with culture shock. These can include

- excessive washing of the hands;
- excessive concern over drinking water, food, dishes, and bedding;
- fear of physical contact with attendants or servants;
- a feeling of helplessness and a desire for dependence on long-term residents of one's own nationality;
- fits of anger over delays and other minor frustrations;
- delay and outright refusal to learn the language of the host country;
- excessive fear of being cheated, robbed, or injured;
- great concern over minor pains and eruptions of the skin;
- and finally, that terrible longing to be home, to be able to have a good cup of coffee and a piece of apple pie, to walk into that corner drugstore, to visit one's relatives, and in general, to talk to people who really make sense. (Oberg, 1960).

Often associated with culture shock are the U-curve and W-curve hypotheses of cultural adaptation. In the U-curve hypothesis, the initial intercultural contacts are characterised by a positive, almost euphoric, emotional response. As fatigue mounts and culture shock sets in, however, the individual's responses are more and more negative, until finally a low point is reached. Then gradually, the individual develops a more positive attitude and the new culture seems less foreign, until a positive emotional response once again occurs. The U-curve hypothesis has been extended to the W-curve, which includes the person's responses to her or his own culture upon return. It posits that a second wave of culture shock, which is similar to the first and has been called *re-entry shock*, may occur when the individual returns home and must readapt to the once taken-for-granted practices that can no longer be followed without question. (Koester, 1984; Martin, 1984).

Many of the students who have spent a term or two abroad on return cannot find their place for some time. They seem to have got used to different life style, different habits, values, and beliefs of their host country. And again one should bear in mind that it depends on the person and its adaptation speed, depths, and comprehension.



Pict.1. The level of communication satisfaction by students from Latvia studying abroad.

In the research there participated 86 students mainly from 3 different universities of Latvia: Latvia University (27), Ventspils University College (33) and Riga Stradina University (16) as well as 4 representatives from Liepaja University and 6 representatives from Latvia Agriculture University. Most of the respondents (54.7%) were studying abroad for a term, and as the research shows that it is the most crucial period for adaptation to foreign culture. The first satisfactory image has vanished and the more critical phase usually starts to end by the time they have to reentry their own culture again. That usually causes certain discomfort.

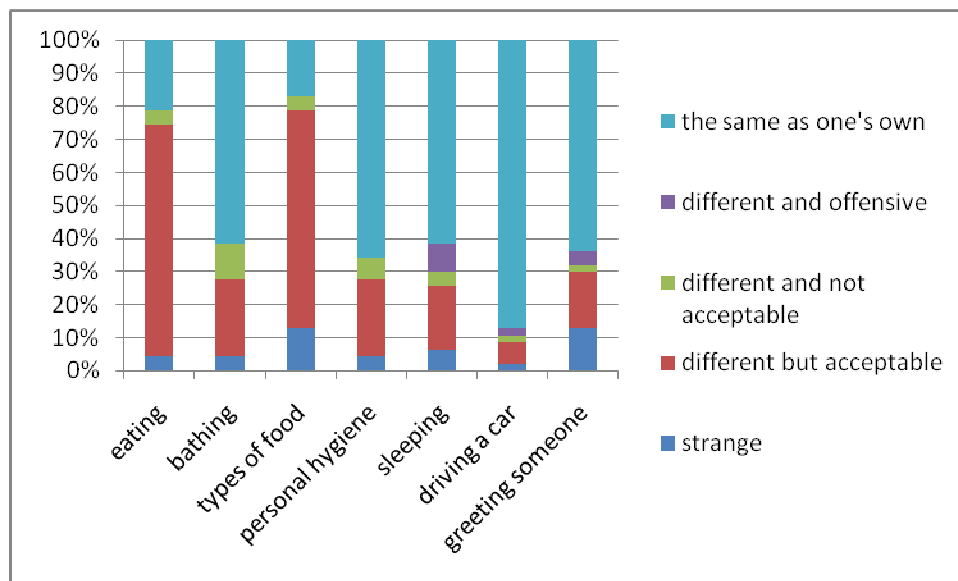
In the graph shown in picture 1 we can see that in general students are satisfied with their stay and level of communication. The students expressing dissatisfaction are among those whose stay is comparatively long- one term (4-5 months), among them usually are also those who are partly dissatisfied. This contributes to the idea about the lowest point of U-curve adaptation.

The differences in accepting another culture usually are connected with issues in the following fields:

- Eating (how, when, with whom)
- Bathing (how, where, how often, with whom)
- Types of food (what is edible and not edible)
- Personal hygiene (daily regime, use of deodorants or perfumes, teeth cleaning, etc.)
- Sleeping (where, how, with whom)
- Driving a car (who, which side of the road, how fast)
- Greeting someone (how, whom, when, why)

Evaluation of these issues were carried out and regarded as (1) strange, (2) different, but acceptable, (3) different and not acceptable, (4) different and offensive, and (5) the same as one's own.

For the fact that most usually students go to study only for one term, further the data analysis is given only for this group of respondents although other results of the research are also available.



Picture 2. Everyday issues determining the comfort of adaptation for students living abroad for 4-5 months' period.

As it is seen from the graph displayed in picture 2, most of the everyday activities seemed to be almost the same as those of their own culture except the food and eating habits. In some cases the way of sleeping habits were annoying (going to bed too late, having the pet in the bed, very loud neighbours and late studying of the roommates). In two cases the greeting of the persons were

not acceptable at all. In another case it turned out to be driving a car that caused the most of the problems, because of regular violation of traffic rules and even minor accidents in the street and parking allotment. The analysis of such responses gives really true and basic insight into the process of adaptation and at the same time points out the issues to be avoided in the future. It gives the basis for future culture studies and exemplifies the existing theories.

Though initially regarded as plausible, the U-curve and the W-curve hypotheses do not provide sufficiently accurate descriptions of the adaption process. They do not account, for instance for those whose experiences remain favorable, for those who fail to adapt and return home prematurely, or for those whose level of discomfort changes little during the adaptation period. Rather there seem to be a variety of possible adaption patterns that individuals could experience, depending on their particular circumstances. The pattern of adaption varies widely from one individual to the next and therefore no single pattern can be said to characterize the typical adaption process. (Nash, 1991). There is also ample evidence to suggest that the adaption process has multiple dimensions or factors associated with it. For example, Mitchell R.Hammer, William B.Gudykunst, and Richard L.Wiseman have suggested that intercultural effectiveness consists of three such dimensions: the ability to deal with psychological stress, skill in communicating with others both effectively and appropriately, and proficiency in establishing interpersonal relationships. (Hammer, Gudykunst, Wiseman, 1978).

Colleen Ward and her colleagues have identified just two dimensions of adaption: psychological and sociocultural. The former is similar to Hammer and his colleagues' first dimension, and the latter seems to combine the remaining two. (Ward, Kennedy, 1999). Despite such distinctions, however, the adaptation process has usually been viewed as a single „package” of related features that allow the same trajectory of change for a given individual. However, distinct patterns of change likely characterize each dimension of adaptation.

Answers on two important questions shape the response of individuals and groups to prolonged intercultural contact, thus producing different outcomes. The first concern is whether it is considered important to maintain one's cultural identity and to display its characteristics. The second concern involves whether people believe it is important to maintain relationships with their outgroups. (Berry, Kim, Boski, 1988).

There exist four major types of adaptation: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization.

*Assimilation* occurs when it is deemed relatively unimportant to maintain one's original cultural identity but it is important to establish and maintain relationships with other cultures.

Assimilation means taking on the new culture's beliefs, values and norms. In the research carried out by the author there were no real cases of assimilation observed but that does not exclude the fact that such type of adaptation exist. This definite type of adaptation refers more to those whose come to live and survive in another culture for longer period or life time.

When an individual or group retains its original cultural identity while seeking to maintain harmonious relationships with other cultures, *integration* occurs. Integration produces distinguishable cultural groups that work cooperatively to ensure that the society and the individuals continue to function well. There the students under discussion showed significant acknowledgement to the expressed ideas of cooperation and understanding among different nations. Both integration and assimilation promote harmony and result in an appropriate fit of individuals and groups to the larger culture.

When individuals or groups do not want to maintain positive relationships with members of other groups, the outcomes are different. If a culture does not want positive relationships with another culture and if it also wishes to retain its cultural characteristics, *separation* may result. If the separation occurs because the more politically and economically powerful culture does not want the intercultural contact, the result of the forced separation is called *segregation*. If, however, a non-dominant group chooses not to participate in the larger society in order to retain its own way of life, the separation is called *seclusion*. When individuals or groups neither retain their cultural heritage nor maintain positive contacts with the other groups, *marginalization* occurs. The form of adaptation is characterized by confusion and alienation. The latter two types mentioned above did not appear with the respondents of the research, because the students who go for studying abroad are well-educated and prepared to face different culture, still there appeared some confusions and misunderstandings as discussed previously and showed in the picture 2.

## Conclusions

1. Successful management of culture shock depends on an awareness of its possible existence thus its symptoms and the degree of its severity.
2. The effective adaptation process takes place when the host culture and the local environment is studied carefully. It could be promoted by mastering verbal and nonverbal language skills.
3. For better adaptation it is essential to develop intercultural relationships as well as maintain an intimate social network.

4. When adapting to different culture it is necessary to assume the principle of difference, sometimes simply remember one's own perceptual context.
5. The research showed that those who anticipated failure events better adapted to different culture.

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