Chapter 3
Learning the Rules of the Game: 
Issues Affecting Academic Acculturation of Asian International Students in New Zealand Universities

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ABSTRACT

This author investigates some important issues that affect Asian international students’ academic and social acculturation at New Zealand universities. Twenty students from China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand who were studying at four New Zealand universities participated in the study. English language proficiency was a persistent academic challenge. However, language often masked other fundamental deeper-level issues that affected the educational performance of non-English speaking background [NESB] Asian students and denied them their legitimate academic identity and full acculturation into the academic community, including academic and socio-cultural issues stemming from their unfamiliarity with the dominant academic culture, writing conventions, unwritten rules of the game, “correct” ways of writing, and styles of interpersonal communication. It is argued that host universities are obliged to investigate these critical issues and identify more programmatic strategies to facilitate academic acculturation of NEBS international students.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Institute of International Education (2014), over 4.5 million students travelled to study at the higher education level outside their own countries in 2014. New Zealand, in spite of its small size of the population, hosted two per cent of the international student market share with 111,984 international students in 2014 (Education Counts, 2015): sixty-eight per cent of them came from the top five source countries: China (24,286), India (15,145), Japan (8,946), South Korea (6,621), and Thailand (3,292).

The number of international students studying for a degree at New Zealand tertiary institutions has increased since 2008, reaching 30,280 (27.1% of the total international student population in New
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New Zealand) in 2014, accounting for 11 per cent of the total enrolments in higher education (Wensvoort, 2014). International education, the fifth largest export industry in the country, has contributed $2.6 billion to the New Zealand economy and created 28,000 jobs every year (Joyce, 2013). The New Zealand government has set an ambitious goal to be achieved by 2025: To double the economic value from $2.6 billion to $5 billion by increasing enrolments (Joyce & Woodhouse, 2013).

There has been a considerable body of research on the transitional issues of international students – the fit between international students and the host education environment. Asian international students, accounting for approximately eighty percent of the international student population, are reported experiencing plights, difficulties, hardships, and problems in the acculturative process and such adjustment challenges have an enormous impact on the academic achievements (Cameron & Meade, 2002; Campbell & Li, 2008; Holmes, 2004; Li, 2007; Ward, 2001a; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). To achieve the goal set by the New Zealand government, to maintain and increase its current share of the lucrative international student market, and to safeguard its education export industry, it is important to attend to the voices of Asian international students, address their concerns, and meet their academic needs.

This study is to explore how Asian international students perceive their learning experiences in New Zealand and examine factors that contribute to the adjustment of Asian international students in New Zealand universities, using Biggs’ (2003) acculturation framework which identifies three specific and interrelated issues encountered by international students in a new educational environment: English language issues, academic issues, and socio-cultural issues. Specifically, the study will investigate adjustment issues involving Asian international students’ English language proficiency, academic and discipline literacies and challenges in learning, and socio-cultural issues that affect interaction patterns in the classroom, and relationships with fellow students and faculty. Two research questions are established:

1. How do Asian international students perceive their learning experiences in New Zealand tertiary institutions?
2. What are the key factors contributing to their cultural and academic adjustments?

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Cultural adjustment is a process that involves behavioural, cognitive, affective, demographic attributes, and social networks (Nasir, 2012; Neuliep, 2015). These factors are interrelated and result in different levels of cultural assimilation and transformation (Kagan & Cohen, 1990). In cross-cultural communication, international students in the host country often meet challenges and experience culture shock because of the lack of sufficient knowledge of the rules, conventions and assumptions that influence their learning process (Bochner, 2003; Neuliep, 2015; Ward, 2001b).

Ward’s (2001b) acculturation framework agrees that acculturation involves adjustment in three dimensions: affective, behavioural, and cognitive. Affective adjustment refers to stress, physical and mental ill health, emotional wellbeing, sense of helplessness, and the level of satisfaction (Bochner, 2003). Behavioural adjustment requires sojourners to develop operational competence to navigate the new environment, foster relationships and social networks with members of the host society, and have ability to communicate effectively their affective and cognitive experiences (Bochner, 2003; Kim,