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The effects of cross-cultural communication education on international students' adjustment and adaptation

The recent increase in the provision of cross- and intercultural education for sojourners has not been matched by commensurate research into its effects on participants. Evaluation, where undertaken at all, has been largely confined to expatriate business contexts and has tended to be undertaken pre-sojourn. Crucially, evaluation has not engaged with the adaptation, adjustment and performance of sojourners related to their actual lived experience of adjustment, or with any key outcomes of sojourns. In response, this mixed-method, two-stage study explored both the adjustment and adaptation of student sojourners, with a particular focus on those studying Cross Cultural Communication (CCC). In stage one, analysis of results of 'international' postgraduate students (N = 680) at a UK university over a five-year period indicated that those doing a degree in CCC tended to perform significantly better over different measures of academic achievement than a closely comparable peer group following a similar programme which lacked a specific focus on CCC. Stage two tracked longitudinally the academic adjustment experiences of 18 students of CCC over the course of their programmes. Findings provided a fine-grained view of the experience of academic adaptation and adjustment, and hitherto rare indications of how and why CCC education might 'work'.

Keywords: 'international' students, sojourners, cross-cultural transition, adjustment, adaptation, intercultural education

Introduction

International students and cross-cultural communication education

There has been an explosion in available inter- and cross-cultural education for sojourners since the 1980s¹. Until recently this has tended to focus on the training of government foreign service personnel, students of foreign languages, international humanitarian volunteers and, more especially, business people. Almost all has been delivered pre-sojourn, and is of short duration and limited scope (Berry, Poortinga,

Segall, and Dasen, 2002; Littrell, Salas, Hess, Paley, and Riedel, 2006). International students – here referring specifically to people who are undertaking a full programme of study outside of the country where they have received their prior education (UNESCO, 2010) – are a rapidly growing sub-segment of cross-cultural sojourners, currently numbering around 4 million people worldwide (OECD, 2011). International students are particularly worthy of focus in an investigation of the effects of sojourner education on adjustment and adaptation because specific and tested performance outcomes, in the form of assessment grades, distinguish them from other sojourner groups (Ward, Bochner, and Furnham, 2001). Additionally, international students are highly likely to see academic adaptation as an important outcome for themselves – academic achievement will be a central goal in their sojourn (Spencer-Oatey and Xiong, 2006). Research interest in this group is increasing, as their importance to the higher education sectors in host countries becomes apparent. However, while academic literature highlights the idea that the intercultural experience of ‘living abroad’ has transformative potential (Brown, 2009; Cushner and Karim, 2004; Kim, 1988; Ward et al., 2001) very little research to date has investigated the inter-relationship between any formal cross- or intercultural education international students may receive and the outcomes of their sojourn (Young, Sercombe, Sachdev, Naeb, and Schartner, 2012).

Those studying inter- or cross-cultural communication are a unique sub-group of international student sojourners – in addition to the experience of ‘living abroad’ these students participate in long-term inter- and cross-cultural education as part of their sojourn as opposed to the short-term pre-sojourn orientation offered to other sojourner groups (cf. Littrell et al., 2006). While as a discreet discipline area the study of cross- or intercultural communication in higher education is still in its relative infancy, its study for either a (predominantly postgraduate) degree subject in itself, or as part of

other degrees in the humanities and social sciences, is a growing international phenomenon, especially in North America and Europe (Young and Sercombe, 2010). There are suggestions in the literature related to the ‘internationalisation’ of higher education that cross- or intercultural communication competence should be an aim for staff and students whether or not they are ‘international’ (Sanderson, 2008; Stier, 2006). However, in line with much other sojourner education (discussed below) whether and, if so, how the specific undergraduate or postgraduate study of CCC makes a difference to adjustment and adaptation remains undetermined.

The adaptation and adjustment of sojourners

Although a variety of terms have been used to describe the cognitive, affective and behavioural changes experienced by sojourners, in this study we employ ‘adjustment’ and ‘adaptation’ as our two main conceptual frames of reference, (Kim, 2001; Littrell et al., 2006). We use ‘adjustment’ to refer to the dynamic, interactive processes involved in functioning in the new academic environment, (Anderson, 1994), and ‘adaptation’ to refer to the outcomes of these adjustive processes (Pitts, 2005). In this conceptualisation, adjustment is best approached longitudinally as a process that can be explored over time, while adaptation can be viewed as measurable outcomes of the sojourn in areas of high salience to the sojourner.

Academic adjustment, defined here as adjustment to the demands of academic life including styles of teaching and learning at the host university (Ballard, 1987), and adaptation, measured as academic achievement, are at the centre of the academic sojourn as international students sojourn for the purpose of obtaining a degree (Ward et al., 2001). However, academic adjustment and adaptation do not feature prominently in theoretical models of sojourner transition as most conceptual models to date are not

specific to the international student sojourn (see for example models by Berry, 2006; Bourhis, Moise, Perreault, and Senecal, 1997; Safdar, Lay, and Struthers, 2003). In the literature, ‘cross-cultural transition’ is generally conceptualised from one of two perspectives: stress and coping, or culture-learning. Stress and coping frameworks (e.g. Berry, 1997) highlight the significance of life changes for the sojourner during cross-cultural transition and subsequent ‘acculturative stress’ (Berry, 1970). It is suggested that cognitive appraisal of the situation and coping strategies are required to deal with this acculturative stress (Ward et al., 2001). Culture-learning perspectives, on the other hand, emphasise the importance of learning the salient characteristics of the new environment (Furnham and Bochner, 1982, 1986), and conceptualise cross-cultural transition as a growth-facilitating experience, where initial adjustment difficulties are followed by steady improvement as the sojourner acquires ‘culture-specific skills’ required to function effectively in the new environment (Ward et al., 2001).

Although Ward and colleagues (2001) have previously integrated both coping strategies and culture learning approaches, their acculturation model was not specifically tailored to the academic student sojourn, although it seems clear that both conceptual perspectives are highly relevant for the academic adjustment and adaptation of student sojourners. In order to function effectively in the new academic environment (i.e. meet the demands of their degree programme), students must employ coping strategies to deal with adjustive stress triggered by the transition from academic home and host ‘culture’, and must also learn unfamiliar academic conventions and practices specific to the host university settings. In the case of one-year postgraduate programmes like those under study here, this process must happen swiftly as students are expected to manage a ‘condensed’ workload within a relatively short timeframe (Figure 1).

- *Please insert Figure 1 near here* -

Evaluation

The general picture emerging from the literature evaluating the effects of cross-cultural education is a lack of theoretical grounding for assessing its effects on participants (El Mansour and Wood, 2010), and a sparseness and inconclusiveness of actual evaluation studies (Littrell et al., 2006; Mendenhall et al., 2004; Puck, Kittler, and Wright, 2008). Evaluation, where conducted at all, has been confined largely to business sojourners who have undertaken cross-cultural training of short duration prior to going abroad (Berry et al., 2002). The type of rating survey generally employed as the sole or main form of evaluation is a participant reaction measure. Such surveys assess how participants felt about the programme after its completion but before their sojourn commences, and do not directly assess or indicate the extent to which it will influence how well participants adjust to a new setting. Most importantly of all, surveys of participant reactions do not indicate any ‘bottom-line’ outcomes in improved performance or more successful adaptation. (Kirkpatrick, 1998; Morris and Robie, 2001).

The study

This investigation aimed to evaluate the effects of a programme of cross-cultural communication on both the adjustment and adaptation of international student sojourners to postgraduate study at a UK university. Our focus on adjustment led us to explore the actual experience of academic adjustment from the perspective of the sojourners themselves, as they were going through the experience. Our focus on adaptation led us to evaluate how well, or badly, a group undertaking a Master’s programme in cross-cultural communication (CCC) education actually did on their degree programmes, compared to a peer group. Doing so gave a view of the sum effects of this education. Relating findings from both stages would, we hoped, give us a

uniquely fine-grained perspective on the relationships between the process and the outcomes of an academic sojourn which was strongly informed by a study of cross-cultural communication.

Method

The study employed a mixed methods design. Stage one consisted of a quantitative analysis of the academic performance of ‘international’ Master’s students over a five year period. It aimed to compare the academic adaptation of CCC students relative to a closely comparable group undertaking another degree. For this, the university’s postgraduate taught programmes were first analysed to find one that was as similar as possible in structure, content, assessment methods and in student cohort composition to the CCC programme. The MA Programme in Applied Linguistics and TESOL (ALT) was found to be near identical in these terms, with analysis across a broad range of indices showing no significant differences between the compositions of student cohorts doing MA CCC and MA ALT over the period under analysis.

A total of 352 and 328 students had completed MA programmes in, respectively, CCC and ALT over the five year period, with cohort sizes on both programmes ranging from 44 to 97. Further analysis of the composition of each cohort on both programmes found these were predominantly ‘international’ (i.e. non-UK) in composition (between 85% and 95% in any given year), with English being a second language for around 90% of students, and entry-level IELTS (International English Language Testing System) or equivalent scores at 6.5 for more than 90% of entrants. Each programme’s student age profiles were also very similar (typically between 21 and 28, with a mean around 24), as were gender profiles (around 80% female on both programmes most years). In terms of prior academic achievement, all students on both programmes had

an equivalent of a UK undergraduate degree of at least a higher 2nd class ('2.1'), with a predominance of degrees being in the humanities or social sciences. Student cohorts on both degrees were very heterogeneous in terms of nationality, with typically 20+ nationalities being represented on each programme and most students from (in order of numbers) East Asia, West Asia, Europe and North America. Student-staff ratios across both programmes were consistently around one to twenty. Both programmes were taught by staff from the same faculty, and both degrees conformed to the same teaching and assessment procedures and standards.

In sum, as far as we were able to discern, both degrees and degree participant profiles were closely matched with the exception that a cross-or intercultural communication focus predominated in the learning aims for students undertaking the degree in CCC. Specifically, this programme aimed to provide an advanced level of knowledge and understanding of the main theories, models and ideas in the study of cross-cultural communication, and to develop an understanding of:

- the complex nature of culture, and of social and cultural identity,
- the influence of human communication on culture, and culture's influence on human communication,
- the nature of social relationships and wider societal issues and how they can be informed by theory,
- the main methodological approaches to, and the impact ethical issues have on, cross-cultural research.

Data was then gathered from university records which detailed summative performances on the two degree programmes over a five year period (academic years 2007-8 to 2011-12, inclusive). This timeframe was used as 2007-8 was the first year

that both programmes ran in their present forms, and 2011-12 was the latest date where all results were available at the time of data collection. We were able to obtain details of performance of all students in all cohorts who had completed the degrees over the time period (N = 680, 352 CCC and 328 ALT). We then calculated mean grade point averages (GPAs), expressed as percentages, on the taught, research and overall mean GPAs. Independent samples t-tests were then conducted on each of these measures for comparing the performance of the people on each programme over the whole five-year period.

Stage two of the study was prompted by the findings of stage one. It involved gathering qualitative data in order to obtain a fine-grained view of ‘lived’ experience of academic adjustment of a group of CCC students. We tracked a group longitudinally throughout their programme of study in order to monitor their academic adjustment. Semi-structured individual interviews were conducted with a sample of 18 volunteers at three time stages: two weeks after arrival in the UK (T1, October), five months into the sojourn (T2, February), and nine months into the sojourn (T3, June). At T1 the students had all undergone an extensive induction to their programme but had limited first-hand experience of the demands of postgraduate study at the host university. By T2 students had completed half of the taught element of their degree but had not yet obtained detailed feedback on assessed work (cf. Young et al., 2012). The final round of interviews (T3, June) took place when students had completed the taught element of their programme. At this point students were able to reflect back on nine months of experience in UK higher education (Table 1).

-- Please insert table 1 near here --

In stage two, we were interested in how the students themselves felt they were adjusting and how they experienced the various demands of postgraduate study. The

initial interview questions were therefore open-ended ('How are things going for you on the programme at the moment'). These initial 'grand-tour' questions were followed by 'mini-tour' questions (Spradley, 1979) probing specific aspects of postgraduate study identified by the interviewee's in their initial response. All interviews were recorded, transcribed for analysis and then anonymised.

Thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998) was then employed on all interview transcripts. Using Nvivo, 9 students' comments were initially sorted into four broad analytical categories. The overall organising principle for this sorting process was students' orientations towards academic study at the host university and their own adjustment. Thus, as a first analytical step responses were divided into 'positive', 'negative', 'neutral' and 'problematizing' comments. A comment was classified as 'problematizing' if it identified an aspect of academic study as problematic while not overtly exhibiting a negative orientation or describing a negative experience. The fine line between some 'negative' and 'problematizing' comments was distinguished by looking at the students' specific choice of words. For example, if the interviewee indicated a clear position (e.g. 'I don't like writing essays in English'), the statement was classified as a negative orientation. However if the student used more tentative language (e.g. 'It can be difficult to write essays in English'), it was classified as 'problematizing'. See Table 2 below for example categorisations. In a next analytical step, every statement in the four broad categories was further analysed for content and placed under an appropriate heading or thematic 'node', along with any others which were sufficiently similar (Hannan, 2007). This inductive process generated a collection of emerging (sub)themes and gave a view of the general adjustment trajectory of the participants while also allowing us to capture its particularity for individual participants.

- Please insert table 2 near here -

The 18 interviewees (4 males, 14 females) were between the ages of 22 and 28, were from 13 different countries and had 13 different first languages. Apart from two students, all participants had obtained their undergraduate degree in their country of origin, in a range of disciplines. None had attended a British university in the past. Apart from the two US-students in the sample, all interviewees were second language users of English. All interviewees were self-selected volunteers and thus likely to be more self-confident and linguistically competent relative to the cohort as a whole, although analysis of the differences in the eventual degree performance of this subgroup relative to the performance of their whole cohort, or to any other CCC cohort in the period under analysis, was found to be non-significant. All interviewees participated in three sessions each, apart from one student who only took part at T2 (Student 10). One interview at T3 was conducted online as the student had already returned home (Student 8). Interviewee details are given below in Table 3.

- *Please insert table 3 near here* -

Findings

Quantitative

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare students' mean grade point averages (GPA, as percentages) on the two programmes over the period 2007-8 to 2011-12. Results indicated that the students who had undertaken MA degrees in CCC performed significantly better than those who had undertaken MA degrees in ALT on assessed work for the taught element of the programmes $t(8) = 3.16$, $p = .013$, and on their overall GPA for the programmes, $t(8) = 2.04$, $p = .076$ over the five-year period under investigation (Table 4).

--*Please insert table 4 near here*--

Qualitative

Qualitative data was then collected in an attempt to obtain a more fine-grained picture of ‘lived’ academic adjustment experience of a group who were studying CCC.

Outcomes of analysis, and representative data from each data-collection stage, are presented and summarised below.

T1 – Early teaching weeks. At T1 the interviewees had all undergone an induction to their programme of study and had some initial, first-hand experience with the conventions at the host university. Therefore, students’ comments were largely anticipatory in nature, often related to comparisons between previous experiences in their home countries and expectations for academic study in the UK. Students’ comments were positive, neutral or problematizing in orientation fairly evenly across the sample as a whole. A majority commented on the highly international make-up of their degree programme, and all who did so were positive:

I love being involved with international students. (German, female, 26)

However, some students also commented on a perceived lack of British students:

[...] I really like that it’s an international environment but also I would like that more British people would be in the programme. (Romanian, female, 22)

Some problematizing comments about their own English language ability and ‘new’ academic practices such as self-directed study and essay-writing featured prominently in the students’ comments. One interviewee from Indonesia felt that studying in a second language meant she had to work ‘extra-hard’:

[...] when I sit in a class and listen to lectures, I have to listen to them and then have to translate it in my brain to my language and kind of just twice as hard as studying in my country. (Indonesian, female, 28)

Similarly, a number of interviewees pointed to the challenges associated with academic reading:

[...] we should read a lot of books but we all feel it's very hard to read book because we should look up the words all the time and then translate into Chinese (Chinese, female, 24)
I'm worried that I might not have this good level of academic writing. (Latvian, female, 23)

The emphasis on self-directed learning was new to students from academic backgrounds where a more teacher-directed learning model was the norm, and was anticipated by some interviewees as 'difficult' and 'hard'. One student from the US described independent study as:

[...] almost like I have to make class for myself in the library or in my room with reading. (USA, male, 23)

T2 – Mid-programme. The second interview round took place in mid-February when students had completed half of the taught element of their course but before they had received detailed feedback on assessed work (cf. Young et al., 2012). Overall, and unsurprisingly perhaps, the interviews at T2 yielded much more detailed comment on their actual academic adjustment than at T1. Analysis showed that the overwhelming amount of comments by participants was either positive or (less usually) neutral related to our analytic framework: all students reported feeling more familiar with academic conventions at the host university, and most expressed more confidence in their academic and linguistic abilities, and greater satisfaction with their academic adjustment:

[...] I feel I adjusted well and I'm doing the right things, I'm fitting in. (Romanian, female, 24)

This semester I know how to deal with it, I'm familiar with it now. (Chinese, male, 23)

However, some students still seemed to struggle to cope with academic English language difficulties:

[...] I just have to push myself harder, to work harder because basically academic language is still an obstacle maybe. (Indonesian, female, 26)

Students commented on several more specific aspects of academic study than at T1, in particular assessed work. Several interviewees pointed to the value of regular written essays and on the whole students seemed to cope well with academic writing although it was experienced as a time-consuming and stressful process:

The assignments were not bad. It took much time but it was ok. (Lithuanian, male, 23)

There was like two or three days when I couldn't go out of the house because I was writing non-stop and spending my nights doing this. (Romanian, female, 24)

Some students struggled with conventions specific to academic writing such as referencing and an emphasis on avoiding plagiarism:

[...] it was difficult because they tell you, you have to reflect and put your own ideas but at the same time you have to quote all the things you put. (Mexican, male, 25)

Multicultural group work was discussed by most participants, and was seen very differently by different participants, with comments frequent and ranging from the positive to the highly negative. On one hand, a majority of students seemed to enjoy this type of learning and recognised its benefits and described it as 'beneficial', 'productive' and 'enjoyable':

I worked well with all my friends in the group assignments. (Malaysian, female, 23)

[...] it was nice working with other people as opposed to just yourself going to the library, so I enjoyed it. (USA, female, 26)

That was such an amazing opportunity to work with the Chinese students. (USA, male, 23)

In contrast, difficulties in collaboration and distribution of workload, compounded by communication problems, were identified as obstacles for successful multicultural group work by some. Some groups seemed to experience communication problems, in particular when two or more group members communicated in a common first language which resulted in other students feeling ‘left out’. Others struggled with the distribution of workload and feelings of having to take responsibility for perceived ‘free riders’ resulted in frustration:

[...] communication was a big problem because they didn’t speak [...] maybe this is a system in China. (Turkish, female, 22)

[...] we Chinese girls and the American girl have different opinions about the cooperation problem and about the equal problem so the cooperation have broken. It’s a pity I think because it’s my first group study in the UK but not a very happy ending. (Chinese, female, 23)

Comments on general classroom interaction were uniformly positive:

[...] it’s interesting and it’s good to go beyond the books which is something that I missed before. (Italian, female, 23)

Overall, students seemed willing and motivated to take part in classroom discussions, although some described this experience as ‘overwhelming’. One Chinese interviewee felt ‘a little afraid of expressing something in the classroom’ and one Indonesian interviewee stated ‘I never raise my hand and speak’. Some students also struggled with the emphasis on independent study, although they did recognise its benefits:

[...] it is very, very beneficial environment if you are self-motivated to study.
(Lithuanian, male, 23)

I like how the lecturers make the students study independently. (Indonesian,
female, 28)

On the whole, most students seemed well adjusted by T2. Interviewees in general reported feeling more confident with their academic and linguistic abilities, and expressed general satisfaction with their progress. Nonetheless, some students experienced difficulties with specific demands of their programme of study such as classroom discussions and independent self-study. Evaluations of assessed work remained limited as students had not yet received feedback from assessors, but overall students seemed to feel that they were coping well with academic writing even if the time before submission was experienced as stressful. Reactions to group work were varied and commonly mentioned difficulties were associated with the division of workload and communication.

T3 – End of teaching programme. By T3 students were nine months into their sojourn and had completed the taught element of their programme. Students now commented very positively on their academic performance and several interviewees reported an improvement from the beginning of semester one to the end of semester two. Keeping up with coursework and dealing with assignments was perceived as ‘easier’ and students reported feeling “confident” and “settled” into the academic routine of the host university:

I’d say I felt a lot more confident because I kind of already knew how the things work here and I didn’t worry as much about the assignments. (Latvian, female, 23)
The first semester I was still like in shock [...] it was too much going on for me for the first semester but this time it’s better and I’m having so much fun with the classes. (Indonesian, female, 28)

As students were approaching the end of their sojourn, the interview focus shifted markedly from academic adjustment to academic adaptation and outcomes of studying cross-cultural communication abroad in general. Students overwhelmingly described their experience as positive, and many commented explicitly on the transformative nature of the sojourn and of the programme:

I think I'm more interculturally sensitive and I have heightened my awareness of other peoples from different backgrounds [...] (USA, female, 26)

Definitely the stereotyping, prejudices, this changed so much. I'm more aware and more conscious of what am I doing and what am I saying [...] (Slovakian, female, 24)

Knowledge acquired in class was perceived as transferable into 'real life', real time encounters:

[...] writing and reading like studies and learning different theories and different models, I think you can really take them and apply them. (USA, male, 23)

We study cross-cultural communication and people here are all over the world, so even when we don't literally study, just go out with our friends or something, you still practice your skills. (Latvian, female, 23)

Even experiences which, for some, had proved problematic during the programme, such as group work, were now viewed more favourably by most – students reported retrospectively 'getting' the point of this despite finding it 'hard' or 'difficult' at the time. Looking back on her programme, and relating it to the experience of 'living cross-culturally' one Romanian interviewee described the programme as 'a great introduction to cultural awareness and cultural understanding'.

One Chinese interviewee felt 'more confident' and 'more willing to communicate with others'. Through intercultural peer-interaction students felt they were

now able to better interrogate and deconstruct stereotypes and minimise the idea of ‘cultural difference’:

[...] you can’t help it, you have some stereotype in your head although you learn at school and everywhere you shouldn’t have it, but you still have it, and I’d like to think I got rid of a few of them. (German, female, 26)

I have learned how similar people are coming from so different cultures [...] it went hand in hand with the CCC-studies, my own experience here. (Romanian, female, 24)

After all this I try not to put people in a box. (Slovakian, female, 24).

Students also reported an improvement of English language skills and increased confidence in public speaking:

I’m proud that my reading speed has increased a lot, and assignments don’t feel so difficult to write anymore. (Finnish, female, 27)

I guess I speak I mean a lot more. (Malaysian, female, 23)

In terms of academic achievement, some students exceeded their own expectations:

I was a little bit like having question marks in my mind but I was really happy. (Turkish, female, 22)

It was better than I expected really. I was kind of worried about being here and how different it is from Malaysia [...] but I think I did quite ok so I’m really glad about that. (Malaysian, female, 23)

However, not all students felt equally satisfied with their overall academic performance. The interviewee from Latvia had ‘mixed feelings’ about her academic performance and the two Indonesian students in the sample felt disappointed with their achievement:

I expected myself can do better. I thought that I can have a good grade. I thought it’s going to be easier but it’s not that simple. (Indonesian, female, 26)

I think I can do better but well it’s ok but I just felt that I could have done better, yeah not really satisfied. (Indonesia, female, 28)

Overall, the interview focus at T3 shifted from academic adjustment to outcomes of studying CCC in particular, and overall adaptation. On the whole, students felt satisfied with their academic achievement and reported a positive sense of adjustment from semester one to semester two. Nevertheless, some interviewees remained disappointed with their academic performance and did not meet their personal expectations. On the whole, students described their experience of studying CCC in particular as positive and commented on several outcomes related to perceived personal transformation and growth, as well as to academic achievement. Students reported that exposure to a multicultural environment and subsequent interactions with peers from different backgrounds had led to increased self-confidence, and to a sense of greater understanding of others and of open-mindedness.

Conclusion

The findings of this study make two main contributions to knowledge in the field of the adjustment and adaptation of international sojourners. Firstly, that a focus on CCC education seems related to more successful academic adaptation. Secondly, that the interaction between sojourners' living and studying 'cross-culturally', and their explicit exploration of the theory and practice of communicating 'across cultures', seems to induce a degree of reflexivity which may help them to cope with difference and change, and so may contribute positively to the experience and outcomes of their sojourn.

Indications that a CCC programme in some way 'works' relate to its apparent association with a more successful academically-focussed sojourn. We noted above the weak designs and paucity of confirmatory evidence emerging from previous investigations seeking to evaluate the effects of cross-cultural education in general (El Mansour and Wood, 2010; Mendenhall et al., 2004). Data from this study provided

evidence of the benefits of a particular kind of CCC education, with our finding that students exposed to such an education seem to have performed generally better over a number of years in terms of academic achievement than a comparable peer group whose learning was not. We should note that these students were exposed to an approach which encouraged an explicitly critical perspective on key concepts such as culture, communication and social and cultural identity, and of the influence of human communication on culture, and culture's influence on human communication. In spite of considerable criticism over a sustained period (e.g. Bond, Žegarac, and Spencer-Oatey, 2000; Holliday, 2010, 2011; Kim, 2005; McSweeney, 2002; Young and Sercombe, 2010), much cross-cultural education, particularly that related to the training of business personnel, is still dependent for its main conceptual frame of reference on *a-priori* cultural categorisation tending to equate nationality and culture, of the type developed and promulgated by Hofstede and colleagues, with which to describe and predict cultural behaviour. Alternative approaches which explicitly resist or at least interrogate such reductive categorisations, are beginning to influence the field (e.g. Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman, 2004), and were especially influential on the MA CCC programmes whose outcomes formed our quantitative data. This study provides evidence that working with such approaches may be associated with successful academic adaptation, perhaps because they inculcate an interrogative approach to concepts which the students on these programmes are actually experiencing on a day-to-day basis, promoting a positive interaction between experiential, immersive learning and a critically-focussed academic model (Stavenga de Jong, Wierstra, and Hermanussen, 2006).

Analysis of the qualitative data set as a whole provided a picture of CCC students' academic adjustment patterns over time. Our findings suggest that students

experienced most academic adjustment difficulties early in the sojourn when they were least familiar with conventions at the host university. This was reflected in the relatively large presence of ‘problematizing’ anticipatory comments at T1 and an increase of ‘positive’ comments at T2 and T3. The more exposure these students had to the new academic settings, the more they seemed able to acquire and develop skills necessary to meet the demands of their programme of study. The fact that the CCC students seemed to acquire and deploy these skills more successfully, in general, than the comparator group following the ALT programme, may be an outcome of the experiential and academic learning models discussed above, or may relate to other factors related to the predispositions of the students themselves. This point is further discussed below.

Our data also pointed to the importance of stress and coping approaches in this process. CCC students’ generally positive orientations towards ‘new’ teaching and learning approaches throughout their year of study could be seen as crucial coping mechanisms employed by the students to deal with adjustive stress, particularly in the initial sojourn stage. On the whole, the dynamic of initial insecurities early in the sojourn, and subsequent steady improvement throughout the academic year, supports the relevance of both stress and coping approaches, and culture-learning theories for the study of international students’ academic adjustment and adaptation. Our data suggested that the notion of acquiring culture-specific skills, as originally conceptualised (e.g. Furnham and Bochner, 1986) may take an overly narrow view of both ‘acquisition’ and of ‘culture’: adjustment and adaptation to the ‘academic culture’ of a host university perhaps requires a more complex, nuanced and fine-grained perspective of the kind offered by the integrated model represented in Figure 1.

Our interviewees set the thematic agenda in the interviews and so decided the salience of topics and foci of the interview – overall, the main topics of interest and

concern to them were English language ability and its impact on academic performance; assessed work, including written assignments and group presentations; challenges and benefits associated with self-directed study; classroom interaction; and the ‘international’ study environment, albeit one largely devoid of host country students. These observations and concerns, to various degrees, confirm and extend those of earlier studies among international students in a variety of locations studying a range of subjects (Andrade, 2006; Brown, 2009; Hellstén and Prescott, 2004; Robertson, Line, Jones, and Thomas, 2000). Enthusiasm for intercultural interaction and the recognition of intercultural competence as a sojourn outcome has previously also been found among other student sojourner samples (e.g. Brown, 2009; Rundstrom-Williams, 2005). Despite difficulties for some, particularly related to assessed group work reported at T2, interaction with programme peers was particularly embraced and commented on positively by all interviewees right across the sample, particularly at T3, as an opportunity for personal growth and, together with knowledge acquired as part of their CCC programme, was identified as contributing to a sense of increased intercultural communicative competence at the end of the sojourn.

If the study of CCC ‘works’, in the sense of contributing positively to academic adjustment and adaptation, then this seems an important reason to build it into higher education programmes in general, and to have it as a useful graduate attribute that all students in higher education can aim to acquire (Stier, 2006). Given the increasingly ‘international’ nature of universities worldwide, and for the stress placed on the acquisition by graduates of skills transferable from academic study to the world of work, it might be an area that all students (‘home’ and ‘international’), as well as staff, can be encouraged to acquire. Whether CCC education is as effective as part of the pre-training of sojourners-to-be, or in a form shorter and more intensively-delivered than a

MA programme, warrants further investigation. Similarly, it may be that something in the predispositions of people who choose to travel abroad to study CCC intensively for a year may incline them to embrace the experience more fully, to experience less adjustive stress, or to cope with the stress they inevitably experience at some point more effectively, and so help them to better acquire the skills and knowledge which contribute to academic success in a new environment. Further study could very usefully, therefore, incorporate comparative data exploring and comparing the pre-dispositional variables, motivations and interests of CCC students and of others following different programmes. Additionally, students' acculturation strategies could be further probed in relation to the four strategies of assimilation, integration, separation and marginalisation (Berry, 1997).

Finally, it is important to make two points related to the whole process of our investigation. Firstly, that in tracking the trajectory and particulars of the adjustment of our participants as a group, we were impressed, throughout, by how particular and individual the experiences of adjustment were – we found there was no such thing as *an* international student experience. Secondly, that the very practical, goal-orientated adaptation measures we were primarily focussed on did not blind us to the fact that our participants' also seemed to be going away with more intangible, but still highly worthwhile, attributes not measured directly in summative academic assessment, including a high motivation to seek interaction 'across cultural boundaries' and an open-minded and positive attitude towards apparent difference. The combination of the positive practical and the human-developmental outcomes should therefore highly commend critical, interpretive, cross-cultural communication education to anyone – policy makers, educators and students alike.

¹ We use ‘inter-’ and ‘cross-’ cultural synonymously throughout this article, in line with much of the prevailing literature, although there is some debate about distinctions between the two (e.g. Gudykunst, 2003..

(Word count: 6,309)

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Table 1. Qualitative data collection timeframe

<i>Time of interviews</i>	T1: October	T2: February	T3: June
<i>Progress through programme</i>	2 weeks into programme	5 months into programme	9 months into the sojourn (end of taught programme)

Table 2. Analytical categories and example comments

Analytical Category	Example Comments
Positive <i>Positive orientation/experience</i>	‘I love being involved with international students.’ ‘I worked well with all my friends in the group assignments.’
Negative <i>Negative orientation/experience</i>	‘Communication was a big problem because they didn’t speak.’ ‘Sometimes I felt I had to teach my course mates and that I didn’t expect. I came here to learn.’
Problematizing <i>Discussing the problematic/complex nature of an issue</i>	‘It is a little bit more challenging to work in a group with more Chinese students.’ ‘We should look up the words all the time and then translate into Chinese.’
Neutral <i>An impartial statement</i>	‘I’m kind of surprised because there aren’t that many British students taking the master’s degree.’ ‘The classroom environment here is very different from Malaysia.’

Table 3. Interviewee profiles

	Age	Country of Origin	Sex	Overall GPA	Taught	Research
Student 1	22	Romania	F	67.80	67.20	69.00
Student 2	22	Turkey	F	69.20	67.80	72.00
Student 3	23	Malaysia	F	63.40	64.70	61.00
Student 4	23	Italy	F	68.20	67.80	69.00
Student 5	26	Germany	F	69.00	68.00	71.00
Student 6	23	Lithuania	M	66.10	67.20	64.00
Student 7	26	Indonesia	F	63.00	65.00	59.00
Student 8	27	Finland	F	70.10	69.70	71.00
Student 9	24	Romania	F	68.80	69.70	67.00
Student 10	25	Mexico	M	70.20	68.30	74.00
Student 11	28	Indonesia	F	60.90	60.80	61.00
Student 12	23	USA	M	69.70	69.00	71.00
Student 13	26	USA	F	66.00	63.50	71.00
Student 14	24	Slovakia	F	63.60	62.80	65.00
Student 15	23	China	F	57.10	54.30	55.00
Student 16	23	China	M	53.90	54.40	53.00
Student 17	23	Latvia	F	68.10	69.70	65.00
Student 18	24	China	F	59.00	61.50	54.00

Table 4. Independent samples t-test for means of cohorts 2007-8 to 2011-12 on taught component, research component and overall degrees GPA on MACC (N = 352) and MAALT (N = 328)

		M	SD
Research	CCC	61.84	1.02
	ALT	60.38	2.38
Taught	CCC	63.23*	.91
	ALT	61.41	.91
Overall GPA	CCC	62.26^	1.28
	ALT	60.66	1.19

*significant at the 95% level; ^significant at the 90% level

Figure 1. An integrated conceptual model of academic adjustment and adaptation

[Please see attached file]