

A Study on Interpersonal Relationship and Psychological Adaptation among the Influencing Factors of International Students' Cross-Cultural Adaptation

—Taking Chinese Students Studying in the UK as an Example

Risheng Zhong, Di Wang*, Yuyang Cao, Xiaojuan Liu

Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China
Email: *sunny@gdufs.edu.cn

How to cite this paper: Zhong, R. S., Wang, D., Cao, Y. Y., & Liu, X. J. (2020). A Study on Interpersonal Relationship and Psychological Adaptation among the Influencing Factors of International Students' Cross-Cultural Adaptation. *Psychology, 11*, 1757-1768.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2020.1111111>

Received: November 3, 2020
Accepted: November 24, 2020
Published: November 27, 2020

Copyright © 2020 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

The Articulation program led by the Study Abroad Service Center of the Ministry of Education of China has developed rapidly in recent years and has become an important way for Chinese students to study abroad. The level of cross-cultural adaptation of students studying in the UK has an important influence on whether students can successfully complete their studies, which is greatly affected by factors such as academic situation, interpersonal relationships, environment and psychology. This study conducts a questionnaire survey among 245 Chinese students studying in the UK, aiming to explore the impact of interpersonal relationship and psychological adaption on the cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students under the special school-running model of the articulation program.

Keywords

Chinese Students, Interpersonal Relationship, Psychological Adaptation, Cross-Cultural Adaptation

1. Introduction

Students studying abroad training programs are a special group of students. The program is a form of study abroad promoted by the Study Abroad Service Center throughout China, which is similar in form to the articulation program. After studying in a Chinese university for two years and reaching the corresponding academic standards, students will go to the UK to complete the remaining two

years of undergraduate courses and finally obtain a degree from an UK university. Compared with the planned undergraduates enrolled by Chinese universities, they generally have weaker foreign language skills, do not develop good study habits, and have weaker learning ability. However, their family economic conditions are superior, social experience richer, emotional intelligence higher than that of ordinary college students. What's more, their interpersonal skills are relatively good, and psychological self-regulation ability relatively strong.

Due to the huge differences in interpersonal communication and living environment between China and Britain, students will encounter various cross-cultural adaptation difficulties when studying in the UK. The level of cross-cultural adaptation has an important influence on whether students can successfully complete their studies. Through research, it indicates that Chinese students' cross-cultural adaptation is mainly determined by four influencing factors: academic conditions, interpersonal relationships, environmental factors, and psychological adaptation. Because interpersonal relationships and psychological adjustment directly affect students' life satisfaction in the UK, the high level of interpersonal relationship and psychological adaptation in cross-cultural adaptation will help improve students' life satisfaction during their studies in the UK, and thus have a positive effect on students' academic performance. Based on the above reasons, this study will focus on the role of the two influencing factors of interpersonal relationship and psychological adjustment in students' cross-cultural adaptation.

2. The Interpersonal Relationship and Psychological Adaptation Problems Encountered by Chinese Students in the UK

After international students arrive in the UK, the original interpersonal network is affected by objective factors such as distance and time difference, and the contact between relatives and friends is also inevitably affected. As their original interpersonal network fades, international students will expand new friendship circles to make up. A good interpersonal network plays an important role in the study of international students in the UK (Li, 2013). With the help of local friends and classmates, international students can better obtain information about studying and living in the UK and improve their life satisfaction and study efficiency.

Making new friends in a new environment is an important means to make up for the original interpersonal network. Good communication with local students, participation in student club activities, and smooth communication with management personnel of various departments of the school are also important ways for international students to improve their interpersonal network. Due to the differences in cultural background, living customs, and living habits between British, international students from other countries and Chinese students, making new friends in a new and unfamiliar English environment is a challenge for Chinese students. How to make new friends and fill up the interpersonal net-

work within a certain period determines to a large extent the level of international students' cross-cultural adaptation, which in turn affects the life satisfaction and learning effect of international students studying in the UK.

After international students come to UK, the psychological pressure caused by changes in learning pressure, interpersonal relationships, and living environment has increased sharply, making psychological adaptation an important factor affecting students' cross-cultural adaptation. Students generally report that due to the tight schedule of language classes and high learning pressure, a little relaxation may cause them to drop out or repeat a grade, which increases great pressure and psychological pressure to them.

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Design

The self-compiled and formatted "Questionnaire on the Cross-cultural Adaptability of Students in the British Class of the Study Abroad Training Program" includes two factors of "interpersonal relationship" and "psychological adaptation", a total of 15 questions, using Likert's five-point scoring, "Strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" are counted as 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 points in sequence.

3.2. Research Process

Instructions and randomly arranged topics are attached to the questionnaire to inform the respondents of the significance of the investigation and privacy protection measures. The author went to the University of Lancaster, University of Leicester, University of Coventry, University of Central Lancashire, University of Portsmouth, University of Westminster, and University of Bedfordshire to collect questionnaires on site. The questionnaires were filled out anonymously and received on the spot. Students will be tested on a questionnaire when they enter the UK for the sixth month. A total of 245 questionnaires were sent out, 210 valid questionnaires were returned, and the effective response rate was 85.7%.

4. Questionnaire Analysis on Interpersonal Relationship

The selection of test questions about the influence of interpersonal relationship on cross-cultural adaptation was shown in **Table 1**. After descriptive statistical analysis of each item in this questionnaire, the author finds that:

4.1. Many Chinese Students Find It Difficult to Understand British Jokes and Humor

There are big differences between China and Britain in Culture. It is difficult for Chinese students to understand the content of conversations involving historical, religious, and cultural factors in daily communication (Tan, 2013). For example, even if the Internet buzzwords widely used in recent years are translated into English, it is difficult for the British to understand. Similarly, it is difficult for Chinese students to fully understand the humor in the British conversation.

Table 1. Selection of test questions about the influence of interpersonal relationship on cross-cultural adaptation.

	Q10		Q11		Q12		Q13		Q14		Q15		Q16	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Very Easy	3	1.43%	51	24.29%	74	35.24%	81	38.57%	51	24.29%	37	17.62%	87	41.43%
Relatively Easy	4	1.90%	72	34.29%	56	26.67%	70	33.33%	76	36.19%	90	42.86%	67	31.90%
Fair	88	41.90%	46	21.90%	44	20.95%	45	21.43%	50	23.81%	58	27.62%	26	12.38%
Difficult	60	28.57%	29	13.81%	27	12.86%	14	6.67%	23	10.95%	20	9.52%	21	10.00%
Very Difficult	55	26.19%	12	5.71%	9	4.29%	0	0.00%	10	4.76%	5	2.38%	9	4.29%

On the question “Understanding English jokes and humor” (Q 10), only 1.43% of the students thought it was “very easy”, 1.9% thought it was “relatively easy”, 41.9% thought it was “fair”, 28.57% said “difficult”, and 26.19% of students thought it was “very difficult”. Even if Chinese international students have passed the English IELTS test, most of the students can successfully complete the course study and corresponding homework. However, in daily communication, many Chinese students think it is still difficult to understand British jokes and humor. On one hand, it is due to language barriers. On the other hand, because of the lack of understanding of British humanities, including national history, religion, and traditional culture, it is difficult for Chinese students to understand some jokes and humor derived on this basis.

4.2. Making New Friends in Life Scenes and Learning Scenes is Relatively Smooth, and Can Better Maintain a New Interpersonal Network.

After studying in the UK, international students will make new friends through classroom classes, student clubs, and dormitories. In the answer to the question “Make new friends” (Q 11), 24.29% of the students thought it was “very easy”, 34.29% of the students thought it was “relatively easy”, 21.9% of the students thought it was “fair”, 13.81% of the students thought it was “difficult”, and 5.71% of students thought it was “very difficult”. In total, 58.58% of students believe that it is easier to make new friends in the UK, and those who find it difficult to make new friends account for 19.52% of the total number of students surveyed. It shows that after having acquired corresponding language skills, Chinese students studying abroad in a foreign country can make new friends in life and learning situations easily, which can fill in the lack of interpersonal network.

When the interpersonal network of international students in the UK has gradually formed and stabilized, maintaining a new interpersonal network has become an important proposition. In the answer to the question “Proactively chat with friends and continue the topic” (Q 12), 35.24% of the students thought it was “very easy”, 26.67% of the students thought it was “relatively easy”, and

20.95% of the students thought it was “fair”, 12.86% of the students thought it was “difficult”, and 4.29% of students thought it was “very difficult”. The above data shows that 61.91% of students think that they can easily start and continue chatting with their friends, actively grasp the process of communication between friends, and can better maintain a new interpersonal network.

Similarly, when answer to the question “ Always feel inexhaustible when chatting with friends” (Q 16), 35.24% of the students thought it was “very easy”, 26.67% of the students thought it was “relatively easy”, and 20.95% of the students thought “fair”, 12.86% of the students thought it was “difficult”, and 4.29% of the students thought it was very difficult. The above-mentioned data shows that 61.91% of the students are still inexhaustible when communicating with friends, enjoying the pleasure brought by interpersonal communication.

4.3. The Degree of Dependence on the Family Is Reduced.

After most students have established a new interpersonal network, their dependence on family is relatively reduced. In the answer to the question “Getting used to live alone away from parents” (Q 13), 38.57% of the students thought it was “very easy”, 33.33% thought it was “relatively easy”, 21.43% thought it was “fair”, and 6.67% thought it was “difficult”, and no student thought it was “very difficult”. The above data shows that 71.9% of the students have become accustomed to leaving their parents to live alone after they have been in the UK six months or more, only 6.67% of the students still think they are not used to living alone without their parents. Living alone away from their parents is an important stage in the growth and independence of young students. A large majority of contemporary young students are only children, inevitably becoming the center of family life and attention. Particularly, students of articulation programs with relatively superior family conditions have obtained more high-quality resources for a long time. The program requires students to study intensively in China for 2 years, during which students leave their homes and start a collective life on the university campus, which has an important and positive effect on reducing dependence on family help and enhancing the ability to take care of themselves. Since students in the articulation program generally choose to enroll nearby, most of the students come from families within the province or neighboring provinces, it is convenient to go home and for parents to visit. Therefore, the domestic learning stage can not only allow students to experience the ups and downs of independent life, parents can provide more convenient help when children face unsolvable difficulties. This stage can be considered as a transitional stage for students to live alone. After two years of transitional period of adaptation, students go abroad and start living and studying alone. Such a step-by-step process has better solved the problem of leaving the family to live alone that students fear and their parents worry about. Compared with studying abroad directly after graduating from high school, the articulation program allows students to gradually exercise and improve their self-care ability (Liu, 2008).

4.4. Student Associations Help International Students to Better Study and Live in the UK

Local student club activities, various Chinese student associations, hometown associations and other activities are important ways for international students to expand their social networks and make new friends. In the answer to the test question “Participating in local social activities” (Q 14), 24.29% of the students thought it was “very easy”, 36.19% thought it was “relatively easy”, 23.81% thought it was “fair”, and 10.95% thought it was “difficult”, and 4.76% thought it was “very difficult”. The above data shows that 60.48% of students think they can easily participate in various local social activities, and only 15.71% of students think it is difficult to integrate into various local social activities. Students in British universities generally participate in social activities composed of the school student union, various student activity clubs, the Chinese Student Association of the Student Union, and the Chinese Students and Scholars Association organized by the Chinese Embassy in the UK. Actively participating in various student associations can help international students expand their connections, make more new friends, share information with each other in study and life, and help international students’ better study and live in the UK.

While studying, international students will inevitably encounter various difficulties and problems that need to be resolved. Communication with teachers, library staff, dormitory administrators, financial management staff and other staff in various departments of the university also affects students’ learning effects and life satisfaction during their studies in the UK. Due to the differences in the educational systems and management systems of Chinese and British universities, the experience gained by Chinese students in Chinese universities cannot be transferred to British universities well. For example, in Chinese universities, students can contact the counselor at any time or go to the counselor’s office for help if they have questions; while in British universities, if they have doubts or difficulties, they need to send an email to the Student Support Department or other departments in advance, make an appointment, and go to inquire relevant staff at the appointment time. More often, administrators of British universities tend to use e-mail to communicate with students, which requires students to maintain good communication with the management staff of various departments (Yang, 2005). In the answer to the test question “Smooth communication with the staff of the school’s residential management or financial management department” (Q 15), 17.62% of the students thought it was “very easy”, 42.86% thought it was “relatively easy”, 27.62% thought it was “fair”, 9.52% thought it was “difficult”, and 2.38% thought it was “very difficult”. The above data shows that 60.48% of students can maintain good communication with university administrators, and only 11.9% of students think it is difficult to have good communication with university administrators.

5. Questionnaire Analysis on Psychological Adaptation

5.1. Psychological Discomfort Caused by Academic Pressure

As shown in **Table 2**, in the answer to the question “I don’t regret coming to

Table 2. Selection of the test question “I don’t regret coming to study in the UK”.

	Frequency	Percentage
Very consistent	76	36.19%
Basically consistent	80	38.10%
Consistent	37	17.62%
Basically not consistent	15	7.14%
Not consistent	2	0.95%

study in the UK” (Q 27), 36.19% of the students thought it was “very consistent”, 38.10% thought it was “basically consistent”, 17.62% thought it was “consistent”, 7.14% thought it was “basically not consistent”, and 0.95% answered “not consistent”. It shows 91.91% of students believe that they agree with the decision to study in the UK, and only 8.09% expressed regret, reflecting that international students can correctly view their environment and accept their choices and decisions.

5.2. Loneliness

Loneliness also greatly affects the mood of international students. Although international students have gradually formed a new interpersonal network, they still have to deal with difficulties in study and life alone because they are far away from their parents and friends with whom they have grown up together in China. Loneliness often makes international students feel more depressed. They often relieve loneliness by strengthening study, playing games, watching dramas, falling in love, and part-time jobs (Song, 2017). In the answer to the test question “I rarely feel lonely” (Q 25), 33.81% of the students thought it was “very consistent”, 38.57% thought it was “basically consistent”, 22.38% thought it was “consistent”, 5.24% thought it was “basically not consistent”, and no student thought it was “not consistent”. The above data in Table 3 shows that 72.38% of students can plan their time and are satisfied with their own time arrangements; only 5.24% of students feel lonely because they have not arranged their time well.

When answering the test question “I always feel very upset” (Q 26), 2.86% of the students chose “very consistent”, 10.95% chose “basically consistent”, 20% picked “consistent”, 34.76% chose “basically not consistent”, and 31.43% chose “not consistent”. The above data in Table 4 shows that 66.19% of students experience joyful emotions while studying abroad, and have fewer negative emotions; 33.81% of students have negative emotions and need to be further tracked, screened with appropriate scales and appropriate psychological interventions.

5.3. Most Students Can Adjust Their Feelings of Missing Family Members in Time, Have Sound Sleep, and Have a Good Mental State

In answering the test question “In the UK, I can adjust the thoughts of my family” (Q 28), 28.1% of the students thought it was “very easy”, 39.05% of the students thought it was “relatively easy”, and 23.81% of the students thought it was

Table 3. Selection of the test question “I rarely feel lonely” (Q 25).

	Frequency	Percentage
Very consistent	71	33.81%
Basically consistent	81	38.57%
Consistent	47	22.38%
Basically not consistent	11	5.24%
Not consistent	0	0.00%

Table 4. Selection of the test question “I always felt very upset” (Q26).

	Frequency	Percentage
Very consistent	6	2.86%
Basically consistent	23	10.95%
Consistent	42	20.00%
Basically not consistent	73	34.76%
Not consistent	66	31.43%

Table 5. Selection of test question “In the UK, I can adjust the thoughts of my family” (Q 28).

	Frequency	Percentage
Very consistent	59	28.10%
Basically consistent	82	39.05%
Consistent	50	23.81%
Basically not consistent	17	8.10%
Not consistent	2	0.95%

“fair”, 8.1% of the students thought it was “difficult” and 0.95% of the students thought it was “very difficult”. The above data in **Table 5** shows that 67.15% of students can adjust their feelings of missing family members in time and adjust their mental state.

In the answer to the test question “After adapting to the living environment, I can have better sleep most of the time” (Q 29), 36.67% of the students thought it was “very consistent”, 37.62% of the students thought it was “basically consistent”. 16.19% of the students thought it was “consistent”, 9.52% of the students thought it was “basically not consistent”, and no students thought it was “not consistent”. The above data in **Table 6** shows that 74.29% of students have sound sleep, and there is no anxiety or insomnia caused by the pressure of study and changes in the living environment.

In the answer to the test question “I am satisfied with my current state” (Q 30), 33.33% of the students thought it was “very consistent”, 41.43% of the students thought it was “basically consistent”, 21.43% of the students thought it was “consistent”, 3.81% of the students thought it was “basically not consistent”, and

no students thought it was “not consistent”. The above data in **Table 7** shows that 74.76% of students are satisfied with their current study and living conditions and begin to adapt to their study and life in the UK.

In the answer to the test question “I never thought I need to seek psychological counseling” (Q 31), 38.1% of the students thought it was “very consistent”, 36.67% of the students thought it was “basically consistent”, 18.1% of the students thought it was “consistent”, 6.67% of the students thought it was “basically not consistent”, and 0.48% of the students thought it was “not consistent”. The above data in **Table 8** shows that 74.77% of the students have a good mental state or self-evaluated mental state, without the intervention of psychological counseling or psychotherapy.

In the answer to the test question “I feel very happy most of the time” (Q 32), 43.81% of the students thought it was “very consistent”, 37.14% of the students thought it was “basically consistent”, 14.29% of the students thought it was “consistent”, 4.76% of students thought it was “basically not consistent”, and no

Table 6. Selection of test question “After adapting to the living environment, I can have better sleep most of the time” (Q 29).

	Frequency	Percentage
Very consistent	77	36.67%
Basically consistent	79	37.62%
Consistent	34	16.19%
Basically not consistent	20	9.52%
Not consistent	0	0.00%

Table 7. Selection of test question “I am satisfied with my current state” (Q 30).

	Frequency	Percentage
Very consistent	70	33.33%
Basically consistent	87	41.43%
Consistent	45	21.43%
Basically not consistent	8	3.81%
Not consistent	0	0.00%

Table 8. Selection of test question “I never thought I need to seek psychological counseling” (Q 31).

	Frequency	Percentage
Very consistent	80	38.10%
Basically consistent	77	36.67%
Consistent	38	18.10%
Basically not consistent	14	6.67%
Not consistent	1	0.48%

Table 9. Selection of test question “I feel very happy most of the time” (Q 32).

	Frequency	Percentage
Very consistent	92	43.81%
Basically consistent	78	37.14%
Consistent	30	14.29%
Basically not consistent	10	4.76%
Not consistent	0	0.00%

student thought it was “not consistent”. The above data in **Table 9** shows that 80.95% of students are in a happy mood and good mental state.

6. Results and Findings

Interpersonal relationship and psychological adaptation are two extremely important factors influencing students’ cross-cultural adaptation. The high level of cross-cultural interpersonal relationship adaptation and psychological adaptation displays the advantages of the articulation program over other forms of studying abroad programs. An important feature of articulation program is that student’s study abroad collectively. During the two years of collective study in China, close connections have been established between classmates and roommates. After completing the domestic study phase, the students in each class will study abroad together in an organized way. In the early stages of studying in the UK, since the local interpersonal network has not yet been established, students from China will naturally maintain close contacts and help each other to solve the difficulties in study and life encountered when they first arrive in the UK, remind each other to register in the police station and local medical system registration and other matters, and purchase of basic daily necessities together, etc. Most of the other forms of studying abroad programs are single international students studying abroad, facing all the problems they need to face after arriving in the UK alone. In comparison, articulation program in an established system provides extremely beneficial spiritual support for students who have just entered the UK to study. Students can work together to face problems and solve difficulties together (Gao, 2008).

In the survey, it was found that at the beginning of studying in the UK, international students suffered from psychological discomfort due to academic pressure. The main reasons are, first the study time and pressure of language classes in British universities are relatively high. The language classes in British universities only last from 4 to 12 weeks. Students must complete the language classes, Academic English, Learning Skill and other courses in a very short time, and pass the exam. If fail, students will be dropped out of school and returned to China. After the student passes the IELTS test again in China, he can return to the UK to start undergraduate courses. The psychological pressure on students is undoubtedly extremely huge. Second, the curriculum system of the British aca-

demical year system is more difficult than that of some Chinese universities and the American credit system. The curriculum system of British universities is academic year. Students must take courses offered by the university (Yu, 2009). Even elective courses can only be selected within the scope set by the university, and students have insufficient space for learning. Even if students feel pressured to study, they must follow the courses offered by the school, and elective courses must be selected as many as the school requires. If they fail more than two courses in the final exam, students will face a penalty of being dropped out or re-reading for a whole year. Through interviews, students generally report that due to the tight schedule of language classes, high learning pressure, and the school-year curriculum system, the learning pressure and psychological pressure on students are extremely large. If they relax a little, they may be dropped out of school or repeated.

7. Conclusion

This study tested 245 Chinese students studying in the UK through the self-compiled questionnaire “Study Abroad Training Program British Class Student Intercultural Adaptability Questionnaire” and found that interpersonal relationships and psychological adaptation are important factors affecting their cross-cultural adaptation. The data from the questionnaire showed that at the time of the sixth month when the students entered the UK, the overall psychological adaptation of the international students was good. Most of the students are able to accept themselves better, firmly believe in the decision to study abroad, feel less lonely, and have enough sleep. However, it is more difficult to cooperate with foreign students to complete group work and discuss a certain issue together.

Benefiting from the school-running characteristics of the articulation program, students adapt to their interpersonal relationships smoothly in the UK. After studying together in China for two years, the 245 students tested went to several universities in the UK to study together. Since the local interpersonal network has not yet been established, students from China will naturally maintain close contacts and help each other to solve the difficulties in study and life encountered when they first arrived in the UK. Researchers believe that the special school-running model of the articulation program has a positive effect on students’ academic adaptation and interpersonal adaptation. In the next 30 years, the internationalization level of China’s higher education will continue to improve. The articulation programs can expand the promotion, increase the number of enrollment, and help more Chinese students successfully handle with cross-cultural adaptation and complete their studies (Sun & He, 2009).

Funding

This research is funded by the Special Innovation Project of Department of Education of Guangdong Province “Research on the Cultural Adaptability of the

Trainees of the Articulation Program from the Perspective of the Belt and Road Initiative” (project number: 2016GXJK046).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Gao, J. W. (2008). The Acculturation Viewed from Reading Response to Naturalistic Novels in Late-19th Century's Britain. *Journal of Sichuan University (Social Science Edition)*, 3, 79-85.
- Li, Y. T. (2013). Study on the Adaptation of Chinese Teacher Volunteers to the UK in Cross-Cultural Classroom Teaching: Taking the Classroom Teaching in Primary and Middle Schools in Manchester as an Example. *Chinese Language Modernization Society Chinese International Communication Research Branch. The 2nd Chinese International Communication Academic Symposium Proceedings*. Chinese International Communication Research Branch of Chinese Language Modernization Society: Minzu University of China, 2013:11.
- Liu, W. (2008). *A Study on the Relationship among Chinese Overseas Students' Acculturation, Social Support and Life Satisfaction in Britain*. Fuzhou: Fujian Normal University.
- Song, J. (2017). *Cross-Cultural Education Research in the Era of Globalization—The Perspective of Cultural Complementarity*. Jinan: Shandong Normal University.
- Sun, G. L., & He, G. S. (2009) The Causes and Countermeasures of Chinese Students' Maladjustment to Culture. *China Extra-School Education*, S2, 176-277.
- Tan, Y. (2013). *Research on the Cross-Cultural Adaptation of Students from Sino-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools in Universities*. Beijing: Central University for Nationalities.
- Yang, J. H. (2005) *Study of Intercultural Adaption Problems of International Students in China*. Shanghai: East China Normal University.
- Yu, W. (2009). *Chinese Students' Acculturation in the UK and Their Use of Xiaonei*. Shanghai: Shanghai International Studies University.