

## **Challenges Facing Mexican Students in the United Kingdom: Implications for Adaptation During the Early Stage**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article reports data drawn from a doctoral qualitative case study conducted during the 2016–2017 academic calendar. The study explored the academic, sociocultural, and affective challenges a cohort of Mexican postgraduate international students faced during their first 2 weeks at a university in England. Twenty students participated in three focus groups, while seven were involved in in-depth interviews. The findings support the notion that the adaptation experiences of Mexican postgraduate international students in the United Kingdom are like those of other groups of overseas students. They undergo an extensive array of challenges related to the perceived extent of cultural distance and differences in individual and societal characteristics, as outlined by Ward et al. (2001). Concerning the early stage, findings did not seem to support traditional views of culture shock (Adler, 1975; Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960).

**Keywords:** challenges, cultural distance, culture shock, early period, Mexican international students

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the last two decades, universities in the United Kingdom have been making substantial investments in increasing international student enrollment (Altbach & Knight, 2007; British Council, 2012). Their efforts have been concentrated largely on students of Asian origin, with students from Latin America and the Caribbean considered as a low outbound mobility group (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2016).

However, as Berry (1997) noted, international students comprise different cultural groups who willingly migrate to a different location in order to pursue or continue their studies for a temporary period.

Extensive previous research has been focused on finding out the challenges international students face and how best to overcome them (Brown, 2008; Hausmann-Stabile et al., 2011; Menzies et al., 2015; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012; Schartner, 2014; Schartner & Cho, 2017). These studies have usually grouped international students together and treated them as a whole (Delgado-Romero & Sanabria, 2007). Subsequently, academic reports on the experiences of diverse groups of international students have largely focused on Asian students, with the wide-ranging experiences of Latin American students classified under the catch-all category of “other” (Urban et al., 2010). This one-size-fits-all approach, where small numbers of diverse international students are grouped as “other,” tends to provide a limited perspective. It fails to capture the impact of cultural nuances on the experiences of diverse students studying abroad (Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Hofstede, 1986).

To bridge this gap, this study focused on Mexican students, the largest group of Latin American higher education international students in the United Kingdom (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018), as well as the least targeted subset of the international student population that has been understudied (Delgado-Romero & Sanabria, 2007; Urban et al., 2010; Foley, 2013; Tanner, 2013). The study aimed to identify the challenges the participants faced during their initial stage in the United Kingdom in order to build a more solid understanding of what their experience abroad actually entails.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The literature on the early stage of international students’ sojourn offers two basic perspectives. On the one hand, traditional models of culture shock and cross-cultural adaptation depict the initial phase of arrival in a foreign context with an impressionistic behavior and a fascination for the host culture. Supporting this notion, Lysgaard (1955) asserted that the first stage is filled with feelings of easiness and success in the new environment. Similarly, Oberg (1960) conceptualized it as the “honeymoon stage.” According to Oberg, “During the first weeks, most individuals are fascinated by the new” (p. 178). Opposite to this perspective is that of contemporary theorists (Brown, 2008; Kim, 2001; Schartner, 2014; Ward et al., 2001), who claim the early stage of the international experience is the most stressful period. These studies argue that stress is more acute upon arrival due to the unfamiliarity of the new environment and lack of knowledge on how to navigate the host culture (Ward et al., 2001).

While the foregoing literature suggests that the early stage is a key period in the adjustment of international students (Westwood & Barker, 1990), the depth of our understanding of the nature of this stage remains shallow. Still unclear, for instance, is the duration of the early stage or the breadth of its timespan. Brown’s (2008) study of the adjustment journey of international postgraduates in England revealed the threshold of culture shock was the first 4–5 weeks. Although the first month was contained in the broad scheme of this research project, the present study reports only

on the challenges faced during the participants' first 2 weeks in the United Kingdom. The goal is to provide a deeper understanding of what those first weeks entailed. The central question addressed is: Do the Mexican students embrace the early stage of their sojourn in the United Kingdom as a "honeymoon" or as a period dominated by stress?

Two conceptual frameworks served as the basis for addressing this question: Babiker et al.'s (1980) concept of cultural distance and the individualistic versus collectivistic dimension of Hofstede's 4-D model of cultural differences. The concept of cultural distance postulates that the symptoms and stresses international students face during their adjustment period is varied by the extent of the cultural differences between their home and host cultures. The concept of cultural distance is used here to explain the challenges the participants confronted during their early stage. Accordingly, this study proposes, "The greater the cultural gap between participants, the more difficulties they will experience" (Ward et al., 2001, p. 9).

Similarly, Hofstede's (1986) individualistic versus collectivistic dimension has been used to explain the difficulties arising from intercultural encounters. According to him, in a collectivistic-oriented society, the bonds between its members are assumed to be strong. Therefore, the primary individual is concerned about feeling connected. The opposite is said to be true of individualistic societies, where the primary interest lies in looking after oneself and immediate family (Hofstede, 1986). Because Hofstede's dimensions emerged from data captured on work-related values at a national level in over 50 countries, it is necessary to urge caution when applying it to a single society, as different gradations of the posited dimensions may be found (Ward et al., 2001). However, given that previous examinations of the individualism–collectivism constructs have found consonance in the values and attitudes of study participants, Hofstede's nationality classification is used in this study to assist the interpretation of findings.

What constitutes successful adaptation? How can it be effectively studied? These are relevant questions for which the literature has yet to provide clear-cut answers. As Ward and colleagues (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1993) noted, there is a lack of an integrated framework for the study of cross-cultural adaptation. Thus, Ward and Kennedy (1994) posited that the adjustment process could be best studied by examining psychological and sociocultural dimensions. Yang et al. (2006) said that psychological adjustment is concerned with the emotional and affective extents of the transition. It describes the stress individuals undergo when immersed in a new culture, as well as the "feelings of well-being and satisfaction" associated with it (Ward & Kennedy, 1993, p.131). In this present study, the construct of "affective domain" is preferred to describe the set of difficulties associated with the psychological adjustment of the participants.

According to Ward and Kennedy (1994), sociocultural adjustment is concerned with the skill of the individual to accommodate, convey, and interact with values of the new society in everyday situations. The sociocultural domain relates to the behavioral aspect of the sojourning experience. It manifests as the difficulties faced in adjusting socially to the new milieu.

To complement the psychological and sociocultural realms, Schartner (2014) proposed the integration of an academic dimension in the comprehensive study and

holistic understanding of the international students' experience. Academic adjustment refers to the "adjustment to the specific demands of academic study. It includes styles of teaching and learning at the host university, such as lecture style, relationships between and with staff, and assessment procedures" (Schartner, 2014, p. 32). The present article discusses not only the academic, sociocultural, and affective challenges a cohort of Mexican international postgraduate students experienced in the initial stage of their sojourn, but also the impact of these challenges on students' adaptation and wellbeing.

## **METHOD**

The data for this article was drawn from the researcher's dissertation: a qualitative study investigating the adaptation experience of international students from Mexico, at a university in southern England. As Berg and Lune (2012) noted, the qualitative approach is most suitable for comprehending the nature of things. A case study was conducted at a well-reputed U.K. university holding one of the largest concentrations of Mexican international students in the United Kingdom (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018). This site and participants were purposefully identified, in accordance with acceptable case study practice (Creswell, 2014). Mexican international postgraduate students were selected as participants because Mexico is the leading Latin American country that sends higher education students to the United Kingdom (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2013). Postgraduate students were targeted for two reasons. First, full-time postgraduate programs in the United Kingdom have the largest concentration of international students. Second, funds and scholarships for Mexican international students seem to be more accessible for postgraduate studies, especially in STEM-related disciplines (Rushworth, 2017).

The inclusion criteria for selecting participants were grounded on homogeneous sampling. The participants were newly arrived Mexican students, pursuing postgraduate studies and enrolled in the 2016–2017 academic calendar. To capture multiple perspectives within the population, this study adopted a maximal variation sampling (Lofland, 2006). The participants included eight females and 19 males, who mostly anticipated a 1-year stay, as they were pursuing a master's degree. A few others were pursuing a PhD and aimed to stay at least 3 years.

The students were enrolled in various programs, but those in STEM-related subjects took precedence. In terms of accommodation, students living on and off campus were included. However, most of them had opted for university lodging. Finally, students included in this study were with and without previous experience abroad. Those with previous international experience had been to countries such as Brazil, the United States, Canada, Japan, Finland, Spain, France, and the United Kingdom. In all, 20 students participated in three focus groups in mid-October 2016 and seven took part in an in-depth interview in late October 2016. The focus groups and in-depth interviews were used to obtain a holistic and in-depth understanding of the situation under investigation (Thomas, 2016).

Initially the intention was to approach the participants at their arrival in the United Kingdom, in order to follow their process of adaptation right from the beginning and report data in real time. This became impossible due to logistical

considerations. As a result, the participants were invited to take part in the study at an institutional event planned especially for their region of origin. This event took place approximately 10 days after the institutional stipulated date for arrival. Data were collected in Weeks 3 and 4 of the participants' arrival. Even though some case data were reported retrospectively, the comments presented here were still fresh, as they could only be referring to a maximum of 2 weeks after their arrival time.

In accordance with the qualitative research principle that "value-free knowledge is not possible" (Scotland, 2012), I acknowledge being an insider, who shared both the participants' nationality and role as an international postgraduate student. This insider knowledge may have offered the possibility of sympathetic understanding, reliance, and collaboration between those to be researched and the researcher (Mullings, 1999). To ensure that my own beliefs and experiences were not substituted for those of the participants, two precautions were taken. First, I kept a reflective research journal, which was used to scrutinize my thinking and monitor how my insights were developing as the research progressed (Hellowell, 2006). This tactic encouraged reflexivity during the research process itself. Second, being aware of the risk that prolonged involvement with the participants could bring (Guba, 1981), I consciously reduced sources of influence by not becoming an active member of the Mexican society and by not accepting social media invites from the respondents.

This study was conducted in accordance with the ethical regulations stipulated by the Ethics and Research Governance Online system of the Institutional Review Board of the U.K. university under study. Access to the participants was gained through support from institutional gatekeepers. I informed the participants about the study, what their contribution entailed, and their right to withdrawal by means of an information sheet. Then, they signed a consent form (Cohen et al., 2011). The participants understood that full anonymity could not be promised, as the focus groups and interviews involved face-to-face communication. Nevertheless, using pseudonyms when reporting findings anonymized their responses. Careful thought was given to how names were assigned as pseudonyms, bearing in mind the cultural context of the participants (Guenther, 2009).

The transcript of the focus groups and in-depth interview were analyzed for themes. I used the themes to summarize what the participants conveyed about their adaptation experience (Bloomberg & Volper, 2012). Allocating a theme under a specific coding category required iteratively going over the data with several coding attempts. Thus, I categorized the participants' experiences as positive, neutral, negative, and challenging. Challenging comments were those where the participants characterized their experience with words such as "a struggle," "a difficulty," "a challenge," or "a hindrance to adapt." I also categorized challenges into academic, sociocultural, and affective dimensions, as suggested by Ward and Kennedy (1994) and Schartner (2014). This was done to obtain a deeper identification of the types of challenges the participants had undergone. Finally, I adopted a combination of deductive (previously informed by the literature) and inductive (emerging from the data) coding categories (Berg & Lune, 2002). This was based on the understanding that successful empirical research emerges from a combination of rationally derived assertions, as well as those, which arose "serendipitously" (Merton, 1957).

Finally, data were collected in Spanish so that all respondents had an equal opportunity for participation. Therefore, I provided translations for the direct quotes reported here because I belong to the same linguistic community.

## RESULTS

### Challenges Faced by the Participants

The challenges the participants encountered within their first 2 weeks of stay in the United Kingdom fell under three broad categories: academic, sociocultural, and affective aspects. Each category is described separately to capture the extent of the difficulties associated within.

#### *Academic Challenges*

The academic difficulties related to an overlap of administrative and academic tasks that the participants had to complete as they settled into their new environment. In the United Kingdom, first-year students are required to participate in a program of orientation activities for a few days or even a week before the full academic term begins on Week 1 (Simons et al., 1988). This is called “Week 0” or “Fresher’s week.” During this week, the participants were introduced to new academic conventions. Two challenges emerged. The first one was an overlap of activities that gave the participants no time to settle in before starting their academic endeavors. The second was the recognition that understanding academic English was a challenge.

**Overlap of activities on Week 0.** Except for a few students who arrived a week or two before Week 0, the participants in this study had been in the United Kingdom for a maximum of 4 days and a minimum of 1 day at the beginning of Fresher’s week. Even though a brief orientation was provided, the participants were thrust into the academic environment, in some cases a day after arrival. Therefore, an overlap of activities did not give the students enough time to settle into their new setting. There were administrative (e.g., enrolling in courses) and academic matters (e.g., attending classes) that needed to be dealt with right away. These presented a challenge to overcome during the first week of the students’ transitions:

... it took me a week maybe to settle in a small room, only because I came to the University every day to do all that paperwork ... it was a little hard.  
—Arturo, interview

Even though the students expected that their chosen disciplines would have academic rigor, they expected a “longer period” to adjust. This expectation was not met. Attending classes the day after arrival was perceived as problematic and stressful since there was no time even to do shopping as classes took place every day right after arrival:

... I thought it was going to be intense, heavy, but not so much since week zero... Week 0 was very, very heavy ... I imagined, like the first month ... was going to be a bit more of introduction, basic knowledge... Not that it’d start so full on. —Mateo, Focus Group (FG) 1

In addition to the academic and administrative clash of activities as they settled in the new environment, the participants resented not being able to take part in social activities planned in Fresher's week, due to academic commitments:

... I would've liked to enjoy the Fresher's week, but unfortunately... as soon as we arrived, the first Monday, lectures and lectures and lectures... So, the truth is that I would've liked to have a slightly longer period of adaptation, or to learn a little more about how things were...  
—Gustavo, FG 2

This finding is consistent with Simons et al. (1988), who identified dealing with administrative tasks as one of the major tasks to undergo during the induction week. According to them, dealing with a list of bureaucratic chores upon arrival sent the message of "being processed" like a product, rather than making the student feel "welcomed or introduced" (p. 10). In addition to the impersonal feeling this approach conveyed, having to perform administrative duties that they knew nothing about, while concurrently settling in daily life domains, only appeared to augment stress.

A distinguishable characteristic of Fresher's week is its social drive. A vast array of on-and-off social campus activities is especially tailored for new undergraduates (Simons et al., 1988). Although undergraduate students in the current research setting were mainly of domestic origin, the postgraduate students who were mostly international and who longed to socialize believed they could have benefited from attending Fresher's week events, even when the events were not targeted for them. The overlap of Fresher's week socials and academic duties prevented the participants from attending.

Schartner and Cho (2017) have criticized running different introductory activities for domestic and international students. They say this segregation dissuades international students from any meaningful integration. For example, in this study the arrival date set by the university for international students was only a day or two before that of domestic students. The findings in this study suggest this approach was unfeasible. The international participants needed more time and space to gradually transition into the academic and social setting. International students were just "getting the hang of it" when the university became massively populated by the arrival of domestic students. Thus, they lost any achieved sense of control. Therefore, careful planning should be given to the timing and length of the induction activities. These activities should be planned to avoid an overlap of the different elements and stages international students must navigate before commencing their academic studies.

**Language understanding.** During the first week, as the students were just being introduced to their educational endeavors, coming to terms with English in classes was a challenge. The participants indicated that listening to unfamiliar accents presented more difficulty than anticipated and had a negative effect on their self-esteem:

... as soon as I heard the first lecturer with an accent... from I don't know where... out of every 10 words I understood 4... it was a huge downer

because I was pretty sure that I was going to understand at least a bit more than that... —Armando, FG 2

The finding resonates with Dean (2012), who indicated that the difficulty of understanding the regional accent of lecturers was the main challenge undergraduate and postgraduate international students in the United Kingdom faced in their efforts to adjust academically. Being unfamiliar with different accents in the host language may not have been, by itself, the source of the problem. Rather, it might have been the combination of different paralinguistic elements, such as speed, intonations, pitch levels, and accents with which the language was uttered (Kim, 2001). Schartner and Cho (2017) explored “internationalization” at a U.K. university and found that staff were not properly prepared to address a multilingual and multicultural audience. When teaching, instructors used idiomatic expressions and metaphors that nonnative English speakers would only partially get or mistake their meaning entirely.

Brown and Holloway (2008) noted that this feeling of linguistic incompetence could have a negative effect on students’ wellbeing. The participants in this study reported feeling tension derived from linguistic incompetence during the first few weeks. Therefore, to ensure their wellbeing and academic success, this researcher recommends that students be encouraged to improve their mastery of spoken and listening practices in the target language prior to embarking in their experience abroad. Also, lecturers should be equally encouraged to increase their understanding of the challenges likely to be faced by their international students (Ryan, 2005). This may result in a less sophisticated use of the language and a better reception of the message conveyed.

### ***Sociocultural Challenges***

The sociocultural challenges the students faced during their first 2 weeks in the United Kingdom related to lack of knowledge about British cultural norms and practicalities. There were complications with accommodation, getting supplies, and unfamiliarity with driving rules. There was also the issue of dealing with jet lag and adjustment to new diets.

**Accommodation upon arrival.** Accommodation issues were a prominent concern for the participants upon arrival. Students who did not arrange accommodation prior to arrival and those who did faced different challenges. Like the findings of Menzies et al.’s (2015) study of international postgraduate students in Australia, students who did not make prior arrangements found accommodation difficult to obtain upon arrival in the United Kingdom. Not knowing the host culture’s way of doing things appeared to have hindered the process. In general, the participants appeared to have underestimated how long it would take to find accommodation and the requirements for it:

It was hard for me ... I thought ... it was going to be very easy to find something ... but... they asked to pay the whole year in advance ... or to make monthly payments you need a guarantor... so I lived two weeks on an Airbnb. It was tough. —Paola, FG 1



This finding resonated with the cultural, social, and academic challenges that Hausmann-Stabile et al. (2011) observed in their study of Latin American-trained international medical graduates in the United States. Hausmann-Stabile et al. (2011) concluded that “lost time and money” (p. 10) could have been saved, had the graduates been better equipped with knowledge prior to their arrival. It is necessary, therefore, to reinforce the need for thorough preparation that requires arranging accommodation prior to departure. This would reduce the strain that otherwise could emerge.

The participants who had made prior arrangements for accommodation had saved themselves from the worry of finding a place to live upon arrival. Instead, their main challenge concerned finance. There was discontent over the perceived overly expensive cost of housing, and the extra payment to use laundry facilities in university accommodation:

I think our halls’ payments are not that cheap... and it seemed absurd to me having to pay separately for the laundry. —Roberto, FG 3

Students who opted for private accommodation resented not being eligible for a university bus card that was given to students staying in university lodging. This would grant the participants access to free city:

...I had to pay for it separately, because I’m not staying in school accommodation, so... it’s like a disbursement that I had not contemplated.  
—Enrique, interview

In Brown and Aktas’ (2011) study of Turkish international students, satisfaction with student housing was likened to finding the comfort and ease they would have at home. In the present study, however, satisfaction with student accommodation was based on a cost-benefit calculation. Money was a fundamental element to feeling satisfied or dissatisfied with lodging.

**The basics of culture.** The sociocultural challenges the participants encountered within their first 2 weeks appeared to have emerged from the dissimilarity or unfamiliarity of cultural practices in the broader context, as was found in Roberts and Dunworth (2012). The participants seem to lack the necessary skills to cope with everyday situations (Searle & Ward, 1990). These included not knowing where and how to do grocery shopping and being unfamiliar with lefthand-side driving (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Furnham & Bochner, 1982). This difficulty did not seem to stem from the complexity of the actions themselves, but from being exposed to a new activity without the necessary prior knowledge of how to do them:

...when you first arrive and you’ve never seen it, you wonder ‘and now what do I do?’ Once you learn it, you realize it’s very easy. For example, in the supermarket, that you can go ahead with your basket and pay by yourself.  
—Mateo, FG 1

Schild (1962) noted that suitable procedures are needed for effective communication to occur between the foreign student and the host culture. Furnham and Bochner (1982) and Furnham (1993) observed that in the beginning people in new cultures tend to be socially unskilled and challenged by the norms and daily

practices of the host society; errands that were not an issue in their home countries become problematic in the new environment. In view of this, it is necessary to familiarize international students with the cultural rituals of their host countries, such as how to go grocery shopping and use self-service machines.

Another challenge during the first days related to the rules of the road, included driving on the left side and unfamiliar road signs. The participants considered this as a “very big difference” between the United Kingdom and Mexico where driving is on the right:

...I come to the University in bicycle, so at the beginning it was a challenge to know how to move on the bicycle, if I have to bike on the sidewalk...on the road, and then, on the left side. —Paloma, FG 3

When I arrived, it was difficult for me because, at least in London, it tells you what side you have to look to, and that’s not the case here. —Isabel, FG 1

The negative emotional impact of lacking culture-specific knowledge and having limited financial resources calls for concerted action by both students and institutions. On the one hand, host institutions could devote more effort to providing students with assistance on daily matters. On the other, students could increase their awareness about the living standards of the United Kingdom prior to arrival. This could help them to prepare financially, thereby reducing the financial stress they could encounter upon arrival.

**Physical health adjustment.** Brown and Holloway (2008) noted that moving to a foreign context triggered not only psychological and affective disruptions, but also physical detachment. The findings of this study supported this. The change of time zone from the eastern to the western hemisphere presented two internal physical health challenges to the adjustment of the participants. These are the re-regulation of the body clock and change of diet habits. Poor sleeping and eating habits interfered with the participants’ capacity to perform optimally in the new environment. Jet lag was reported to have lasted between 5–14 days. The symptoms were perceived differently depending on how much it had interfered with school performance. For instance, participants who arrived a few days earlier than the beginning of Week 0 expressed fewer sleep disruptions. These did not perceive jet lag as a hindrance to their adaptation:

It lasted like 5 days... it wasn’t really a problem. —Enrique, interview

However, students who arrived a day before the beginning of Fresher’s week experienced greater difficulty in adjusting. For these, jet lag symptoms conflicted with academic duties:

... the first two weeks... I was falling asleep in class. —Mateo, FG 1

The other welfare concern was adjusting to British diets. Adapting to English food was reported as one of the recurrent and “most difficult” aspects of adjustment upon arrival.

The food, I'm missing it a lot... —Armando, FG 2

The difference between Mexican and British cuisine was perceived as significant:

Food seems bland... and expensive to me; ... it's not worth what it costs ... doesn't seem tasty to me. —Arturo, interview

The participants' dislike for the new type of food brought preoccupation with the negative impact it could have on health. They were conscious of the fact that they needed to adjust to the food quickly:

... solving the food issue... was one of my priorities, the first few days... because otherwise "I'm not going to eat here, I'll lose weight," and I said, "this can't be possible." —Pablo, interview

This finding supports previous research, which recognizes an evident link between food and cultural identity (Warde, 1997). Similarly, Brown and Aktas (2011) revealed food and the socialization around it as a main concern for Turkish international students. In this study, however, there were no associations found between the dislike for local food, as it pertains to the longing for the situational context in which home meals were taken.

### *Affective Challenges*

Within the first 2 weeks, the participants' wellbeing was influenced by homesickness and financial stress, in different ways and to different extents.

**Homesickness.** Concerning homesickness, the participant's views were varied by how distal or proximal the host culture was perceived. The students who perceived the U.K. environment as "familiar" did not seem to miss home:

... I don't feel that I'm in England... I never thought that things were so, so similar in many ways... I feel that I'm in Mexico. Well... in a familiar place. —Sara, interview

Conversely, the feeling of homesickness was stronger when the U.K. culture was perceived as very different and distant from their own:

... in the United States, there are a lot of people from Mexico ... you still feel more like sheltered than in here, right? Here you still struggle a little, you struggle. —Jorge, interview

These findings support the previous research claims that there is a relationship between the cultural distance and the level of difficulty in settling in the new environment (Babiker et al., 1980). As Furnham and Alibhai (1985) and Searle and Ward (1990) noted, the greater the cultural gap between home and host culture, the more difficulties the student would face to adapt. However, homesickness was not seen as a difficulty when it was understood as an expected challenge to face, regardless of the degree of cultural familiarity:

The other part, the emotional, that I miss my mom and my boyfriend, ... here, there and everywhere ... it would've been the same. —Ariana, FG 2

The foregoing assertion partially opposes Searle and Ward (1990), who acknowledged that expected difficulties and cultural distance were the most influential factors of sociocultural adjustment. However, the findings of this study show that those two elements (expecting a difficulty and cultural gap) did not have to happen simultaneously to influence the difficulty of settling into the new culture.

**Financial stress.** In corroboration of Brown and Holloway (2008) and Newsome and Cooper (2016), the participants indicated that finances were a source of stress. The stress emanated from the struggle to meet the high living costs in the United Kingdom. Three related causes were revealed. The first related to the exchange rate. There was a significant disparity between Mexican peso and the British pound, and the product of this appeared to have taken a toll on the students' emotional wellbeing:

I had pesos, not pounds, so I was paying in pesos, but it does hurt you a bit.  
—Isabel, FG 1

The second related to not knowing how to manage their own expenses, due to an apparent overreliance on scholarship. The students found managing day-to-day financial responsibilities through budgeting as a significant challenge:

It's a bit difficult ... to manage the money you've got ... for the first days and all of a sudden, it gets extended because it so happens that [sponsor] deposits ... on the fifth working day. So, you're with the same twenty pounds in the pocket ... it's like a stress you've got that doesn't let you start enjoying the experience from the beginning. —Gustavo, FG 2

Third, the overreliance on scholarship led to a feeling of financial and emotional insecurity:

I didn't come with a lot of money ... and I said to myself 'this has to be enough' until [sponsor's name] makes our deposit ... So, I was a bit ..., too apprehensive the first two weeks; I couldn't enjoy all of it. —Armando, FG 2

The psychological implication of being financially constrained produced the feeling of stress and apprehension that negatively affected the participants' intellectual capacity and ability to concentrate on the academic tasks they were to pursue (Haushofer & Fehr, 2014). Thus, Schulte and Choudaha (2014) and Brown and Holloway (2008) recommended that prospective students seek predeparture, forthright and detailed information about the complete costs of attendance as a helpful tactic for the students to be better prepared (Schulte & Choudaha, 2014).

## DISCUSSION

### **Participants' Adaptation in the First 2 Weeks**

The findings from this research support the notion that Mexican postgraduate international students were comparable to other groups of overseas students in undergoing an extensive array of challenges, as asserted by Ward et al. (2001). To varying degrees, these difficulties included academic, linguistic, sociocultural, physiological, affective, and financial challenges. Lack of time, inadequate preparation, personality, and societal attributes played an influential role in the type of challenges the participants experienced during their first 2 weeks in the United Kingdom.

The university where this study took place advised its international students to arrive the Wednesday or Thursday prior to the beginning of Week 0. However, the majority of the participants arrived only a couple of days before the beginning of Fresher's week. This gave them little or no time to adjust. Even when the participants arrived on the institutionally advised day, an overlap of activities hampered the students' adaptation. The participants had to deal with not only university and outside life, but also academic and administrative demands. Also, physiological factors, such as jet lag, interfered with the students' academic performance. A dearth of opportunities for the participants to socialize with domestic students featured equally as a hindrance to adaptation.

Hofstede (1986) and Urban et al. (2010) have classified Latin America as a collectivist society. Societies classified as such, including Mexico, tend to prioritize the building of social relationships to foster its members' wellbeing. It is not surprising, therefore, that the participants longed for more social activities that would have increased their confidence and connection with the host environment. But not all students from collective societies seek this level of connectedness. Peacock and Harrison (2009) highlighted how Chinese students, who originate from a collectivist society, exhibited some of the most excluding behaviors among other groups of students. This might suggest that while some attributes of a collectivist society are shared, others are not. Therefore, the change of circumstances that tax international students' personal resources and result in psychological discomfort may depend also on other cultural and personal micro level characteristics.

The lack of information about the English culture and university life in the United Kingdom emerged as major hindrances to a smooth transition. This lack of culture-specific knowledge was also found to be an obstacle to the acculturation of a group of Dominican international students in the United States (Urban et al., 2010). Being unaware about what the participants would encounter culturally, socially, administratively and academically upon arrival caused them varying degrees of stress during their first 2 weeks of stay. This included lack of knowledge about how to look for suitable accommodation, enroll in courses, do grocery shopping, and real costs of living and studying in the United Kingdom. These hindrances stalled the adaptation of the participants to on-and-off-campus U.K. contexts.

Concerning accommodation, the findings showed that students who opted out of university's lodging felt adrift. Institutional guidance was apparently not available to

students who decided to stay in private housing. These students had to discover by themselves how to deal with bureaucratic procedures. This is consistent with Roberts and Dunworth's (2012) conclusion that students who did not request the university housing felt left alone. This seems to indicate different treatment and level of support for students staying in or out of university. Opting for university accommodations apparently granted students "privileges." This suggests the need for U.K. universities to inform international students about the advantages and disadvantages of choosing university versus private accommodations. This might assist them in making an informed decision about their choice of housing and diminish the stress experienced on arrival.

The findings related to financial stress appear to resonate with Menzies et al. (2015), who noted that a miscalculation of the costs of living and studying in the host country hindered the experience of the international postgraduate students in their study. Not knowing what the housing service should include, and what it actually entails, contributed to the participants' budgeting oversight (Roberts & Dunworth, 2012). As Cemmell and Bekhradnia (2008) pointed out, the total cost of getting a degree overseas include not only the tuition and fees, but also living costs and other expenses. Therefore, having the necessary information beforehand might help to raise awareness about the living standards in the United Kingdom. This would help the financial preparation of the students for the experience abroad. This groundwork could in turn help to lessen the financial stress faced on arrival (Ward et al., 2001).

## **CONCLUSION**

The findings of this study do not seem to support traditional views of culture shock (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960), in which the early stage of the experience is marked by feelings of excitement. Like Brown (2008), who also investigated postgraduate internationals studying in the United Kingdom, this research identified the first 2 weeks as a period where stress and uncertainty were at peak. The participants did not feel that their first stage upon arrival corresponded with those of a honeymoon phase. Rather, they likened their experiences to those of the crisis stage, where travelers actually experience "the real conditions of life" (Oberg, 1960, p. 178). This is when sojourners undergo a significant amount of stress, as stipulated by the contemporary theories of culture shock and cross-cultural adaptation (Ward et al., 2001).

With respect to cultural distance, the findings seem to support the theory that the greater the cultural gap between home and host culture, the more difficulties the student would face in adapting (Babiker et al., 1980; Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Searle & Ward, 1990). However, the breadth of this cultural gap seemed to be associated with how distal or proximal the host culture was perceived by the participants, rather than with actual regional and geographic distance. In other words, the participants' perception of a cultural gap, and the ease or difficulty to adapt, differed despite belonging to the same cultural group. While some participants perceived the U.K. culture as very different and were finding it difficult to settle, others, even without previous experience, felt the culture was very similar to their own and were finding it easier to settle. Thus, this research supports the notion that there is a relationship between cultural distance and level of difficulty

in settling into the new environment. It highlights the claim that the extent of difference could be perceived or real (Babiker et al., 1980). This finding might help in promoting the view that adapting to a new culture requires shared national and cultural traits, as posited by Hofstede (1986). However, adjustment seemed to go beyond these macro level characteristics. It included individual personality features that may have impacted the sojourners' perception of the host culture (Ward et al., 2001).

### **Implications**

Based on the findings, consideration should be given to providing a longer period for international students to arrive and settle before they are to start pursuing their academic goals. Such allowance would provide the students more time to find their way around, in and outside campus. This will help them to deal with physiological adjustment issues, such as jet lag, before encountering administrative and academic demands that would induce stress. Likewise, it calls for more thorough pre-arrival preparation to better equip international students for the challenges likely to be faced upon arrival.

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