Asian Students' Experience of Culture Shock and Coping Strategies

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Abstract

For international students, studying abroad has not been free from personal challenges. Not all students can adjust in an alien culture with ease. This research on Asian students' experience of culture shock and coping strategies offers an understanding of the international students' needs, adjustment difficulties, managing of anxiety and coping strategies. The research will be beneficial in generating ideas for better management of culture shock. In this study, Asian students of collectivist culture were recruited from the existing international student body of a university in the United States. The students willing to spare nearly an hour of their time for in-depth interviews were invited to participate. The data gleaned from the interviews were interpreted and analyzed using a theoretical thematic analysis following the work of Braun and Clarke (2006). Salient themes emerged while applying constant comparison technique in relation to the research questions. It was found that the Asian students' culture shock closely followed a W-curve theory of transition pattern of stages suggested by Zeller and Mosier (1993). It is natural for the Asian students to experience a roller coaster ride of cultural adjustment cycle once they embark on a journey abroad for education. Knowing about this pattern could make the transition easier. While students may at times find different cultural values in the host culture frustrating, yet there are positive sides in every approach to life.

Keywords: International Student, Asian, Culture Shock, Coping, W-Curve Theory of Transition

1   Introduction

Studying abroad has the possibility of grooming students to become accomplished citizens, however, they also throw up challenges. For instance, not all students can adjust to a new culture with ease. Being exposed to an alien culture requires students to confront a range of additional challenges besides studying. These challenges involve social adjustment, interpreting an unfamiliar culture, overcoming language barriers, academic challenges, cultural shock, personal disorientation, and psychological distress, to name a few (Buttaro, 2004; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Lin, 2006; Xiaoqiong, 2008). International students in a foreign culture must adjust to many cultural challenges. The experiences they face once they stumble upon an unfamiliar culture have been studied before, for instance Lin (2006) studied how Chinese students dealt with culture shock in the United States. However, further research in culture shock, especially with the Asian students per se, and their coping strategies have not been done till date. Therefore, it is, critical to understand the experiences and needs of Asian international students, their difficulties in adjusting to a new culture, management and coping strategies that will help evolve ideas to manage culture shock. The infor-

mation gleaned from this research could be used to guide future international students and assist university services that help these students to adjust to new cultures.

2   Literature Review

Many students who travel to foreign countries for studies experience situations that are different from those in their home country (Naysmith & Corcoran, 2001, Xiaoqiong, 2008). Such situations lead to what is called culture shock. According to Oberg (1960), culture shock is the anxiety that is caused by loss of familiar social surroundings and exchanges. Adler (1975) argued that culture shock is the confusion that arises after a person is exposed to unfamiliar social signals. Xiaoqiong (2008) argues that Asian students experience culture shock after they eat unfamiliar food in a country that is noticeably different from their own. Food becomes an obvious cue to Asian students that indicates that they are in an alien environment. Besides food, even table manners in a host nation makes them realize that they are in a different culture. For example, most people from the Southeast Asia, use their hands to eat than use knife and fork. The East Asians and the Southeast Asians like to eat warm food and vegetables than have them cold. There are religious

restrictions that comes into play as well. Hindus don't eat beef, and the Muslims don't eat pork.

Having animals as pets in countries such as the U.S., the U.K. and Australia contrasts with Asian cultures where most people have little, if any, affinity for pet animals. Many Asian students, therefore, are afraid of dogs, as they were brought up with a belief that dogs were dangerous and dirty. This understanding is in contrast with Western cultures where dogs and cats are loved. Other such culture shocks include importance to privacy by many people of Western nations. For instance, in Western nations most adults do not live with their parents. This is in contrast with Asian cultures where infringement on privacy is not frowned upon (Xiaoqiong, 2008). Privacy being of the Western core values, it is one of the fundamental premises of the day by day interactions. Besides, the Westerners place considerably more emphasis regarding privacy in inter-cultural communications. In any case, however, Chinese cultural esteem, for example, is greatly different. Ordinary Chinese individuals including most of the college students pay less heed to such considerations as privacy. A lot of misunderstandings happen on account of the absence of privacy awareness (Zhang, 2013).

Lin (2006) argued that for many international students culture shock starts even before they travel out of their home country. For such students, culture shock intensifies during the first few weeks or months of their exposure to a foreign culture (Khwaja & Stallman, 2011; Lin, 2006). Often these pre-arrival stressors comprise feelings of excitement, uncertainty, anxiety, and stress. While international students sometimes feel excitement in travelling to a foreign nation for studies, there are times when such excitement is overtaken by feelings of uncertainty, anxiety and stress. Uncertainty in finding suitable accommodation add to the existing pre-arrival stressors. For international students, post-arrival stressors in a host nation were lack of transportation, living expenses, language barrier and getting accustomed to the academia (Buttaro, 2004; Khwaja & Stallman, 2011; Lin, 2006). Other post-arrival stressors included feelings of isolation during the first few years of living in a host country (Buttaro, 2004, Khwaja & Stallman, 2011), separation from family members and homesickness (Khwaja & Stallman, 2011; Lin, 2006), poor cooking facilities, monotonous small-town life and political discrimination (Lin, 2006). Buttaro (2004) contended that the culture and traditions of the home countries of international students have an impact on their study habits. Little, if any, research is available on coping strategies of international students with regard to culture shock in foreign countries. Lin (2006) argued that international students should interact with students from their own home nation to adjust to a new culture. Student organizations, too, can play a major role in helping international students fit into a new culture (Lin, 2006).

For many students coming from collectivistic cultures, it is often difficult to live independently and many of them lack survival skills needed in an individualistic society. At times, many students find it difficult to adjust to living conditions, for instance leasing an apartment and following rules laid out by the apartment owners. Other hurdles include lack of familiarity with public transportation, lack of information on food outlets and prices of food, and limited shopping hours, etc. In some instances, the foreign students also experience culture shock after they are exposed to racism (Khwaja & Stallman, 2011). Though people from collectivist societies tend to put greater worth on behaviors promoting in-group reliance and in-group objectives, people from individualistic societies are more inclined to underwrite practices identified with freedom from in-group reliance. People from individualistic societies also endorse behaviors that assist in the attainment of individual objectives (Hofstede, 1991; Triandis, 1990).

Agreeing with this hypothesis, the psychological aspect of culture shock can be comprehended in terms of social dissimilarities and of sentiments of dejection in the host nation. The social element of culture shock can be explained in terms of people lacking adequate cultural knowledge about the host nation, and people having solid cultural identities that would make them less inclined to adjust to the host society. As indicated by this approach, conformity with diverse culture would depend on people's capacity to bridge cultural differences between their home country and the host nation, and also on significant cross-cultural interactions with people from the host nation (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004).

3 Research Questions

RQ1: How do contemporary Asian students of collectivistic cultures experience culture shock in an individualistic host country?
RQ2: What are the coping strategies that contemporary Asian students adopt to settle in the existing host culture environment?

3.1 How is the Study Different than the Existing Ones

Little, if any studies look into the phenomena of adapting strategies of culture shock in foreign cultures of international students, especially Asian students. As of yet, not many existing studies have focused on the experiences of culture shock and coping strategies of contemporary Asian students from collectivistic cultures, particularly in context of a US University. Through qualitative studies reflected on the coping strategies of international students in a British University, Cooper and Newsome (2016) investigated this phenomenon on a medley of students from different backgrounds– most of the study participants were from the Asian and Far Eastern background, and some from European and North American backgrounds. Khwaja and Stallman (2011) studied this particular phenomenon on the Asian students of an Australian University.

4 Methodology

4.1 Sample Characteristics

International students of a large university in the U.S. were asked to participate in long, in-depth interviews regarding their experiences pertaining to culture shock and coping strategies while studying abroad. A purposive non-random sample of Asian students from different countries studying in different departments of the university was taken. Third parties like different student associations on campus were approached in order to reach out to potential participants with pertinent information about the study and ways to contact the researcher. This allowed the potential participants to choose whether they wanted to contact the researcher and share their contact information. After the potential participants agreed to be part of the study, a convenient schedule and time was arranged for the interviews. The participants were interviewed about their experiences in the United States. Nine graduate students of Asian origin—seven from Southeast Asia (four from Bangladesh, and three from India), one from the Middle East (Kuwait), and one from East Asia (Taiwan) participated in the in-depth interviews. The students moved to the U.S. for study purposes in 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014, and 2015. Purposive sampling is popular in qualitative studies regarding identification and collection of information-rich participants who are particularly knowledgeable or experienced regarding the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, and Hoagwood). In purpos-

ive sampling, a researcher has sufficient knowledge on the topic to select a sample. The participants were chosen in this sampling method according to the nature of the topic. Therefore, skills and capabilities of the researcher to find appropriate individuals to contribute to the achievement of research objectives played an important role in the outcome of this study using this sampling technique.

4.2 Instruments

The instrument of study was qualitative in-depth interviews. In a semi-structured open-ended long interview, the probes developed around the stages of cultural immersion, culture shock, adjustment, and coping strategies. The researchers dived into the participants' personal and exclusive encounters with the phenomenon of culture shock utilizing the case study approach (Tsui, 2003) and semi-structured (Ribbons, 2007), in-depth (Nisbet, 2005), informant-style interviews. The questions were semi-structured to obtain conformity with the pattern of questions that would enable the researchers to codify answers in a systematic manner. The questions were not rigid as a little customization was required to allow leeway for probing. Asking probing questions is actually an alternative way of discovering more detail. The way to do this could be asking the interview participant an example to help the interviewer understand or clarify a statement that the interviewee has made. For instance, "Since you said this had been the first time you had come here (in the USA) when you stayed all alone, tell me, was that the very first time of your staying all alone in your life?" Sometimes, additional information from the participant could be sought for further clarification. For instance, "As you talked about gay couples here, is there any other thing that was different from your home culture? Can you recall another time or other times if you had any feelings regarding any differences between your home culture and the new culture that became apparent?" With the follow-up probes, the participants were asked about their initial experiences and feelings while beginning their journey to study abroad, apparent disorientation (if any, i.e., noticing any contrasting scenario between the home country and the host country), any phase of uncertainty or confusion, any struggle to fit in at any stage of this journey, the difference in food choices (if any), missing native culture festivities, holidays and events, inability to adjust to changes (if any), apparent contrasting power distance and cultural difference with regard to teacher-and-student relationship (if any), comparison between the home and host country communication styles and lifestyle, ways of coming to terms with problems that made them confused or lost, the adjustment phase when they felt comfortable and competent in the new host culture, previous experiences of traveling abroad (if any), experience of reverse cultural shock (if any), narrative of the cultural adjustment cycle, the recollection of the types of stress experienced (if any) while being immersed in a culture shock, and the participants' coping strategies when immersed in shock, etc.

4.3 Procedure

With this research project, ethical clearance in the form of Institutional Review Board (IRB) permission was obtained. The participants were recruited from the existing international student body at the university. Students willing to volunteer in order to participate and spare about one hour of their time for an interview for the study were invited to a public place in natural settings like the university library discussion rooms or relatively quieter areas in the cafés around the university during mutually convenient times. The interview sessions were audio-recorded with

permission and were later transcribed verbatim. Refreshments were served to the participants for a better ice-breaking in a relaxed atmosphere. Before starting the interview, the participants were briefed about the study and its purpose which was geared towards adding to the literature in order to promote students' adjustment to an alien culture and environment. The participants were also briefed about their voluntary participation and that they were free to discontinue the interview anytime. Before the interview, they were also told about the confidential nature of the interview and the use of pseudonyms when the researchers were supposed to be analyzing the results. Then the participants were asked to sign an informed consent form before the researcher started the interview.

After data collection, a theoretical thematic analysis was conducted. The themes were dependent on the capacity of the themes to capture something salient in relation to the research questions. With the deductive or top-down approach, the researchers' theoretical and analytic interest in the area was prioritized and therefore, more explicitly analyst-driven (Braun & Clarke, 2006). A constant comparison technique was used to determine the salient themes while coding the data. The salient themes were patterned responses emerging from the data set in relation to the research questions. The themes were identified on a semantic or explicit level using the surface meaning of the data (i.e. not looking for anything beyond what the participants have said) (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The W-Curve Theory of Transition by Zeller and Mosier (1993) was utilized as a basis for the analysis of data.

4.4 Limitations

A majority of responses gained from interviewing the participants matched with the feedback from others, yet a larger number of participant feedback would only ensure greater validity and reliability. To obtain triangulation of viewpoints, more participants would be required. At the time of the interviews, a number of students did not return to their home culture even for a sojourn. Therefore, whether they experienced any kind of strain that is typical in the mental isolation stage could not be addressed and interpreted in their case for this study. Researcher bias could also play a part inadvertently. No research is without any flaw, and neither is this research.

4.5 Theoretical Framework of the Methodology

The phenomenon of culture shock is a complex construct that cannot be articulated by mere a questionnaire survey. The experience of mental adjustments and transitions that foreign students have to go through can be better addressed with qualitative study. Understanding of the contexts related to the experience of the phenomenon and the environment in which the complexity of the phenomenon is experienced, could be explained with subtlety only through the methodology described in this paper. Also, in order to address the question of 'why' and 'how' of this particular phenomenon, only a qualitative study with purposive, non-random sample is justified for the purpose of study. The W-Curve is an anticipated example of stages that happen when a person experiences culture shock. This is based on a research study done on students studying abroad. Zeller and Mosier (1993) found that the W-Curve could likewise be connected to the first-year students and the stages they experience in adjusting to another society. It is typical to have ups and downs of the W-Curve and knowledge about this may make transition simpler. The typical W-Curve points include the following stages— Honeymoon,

Culture Shock, Initial Adjustment, Mental Isolation, and Acceptance and Integration.
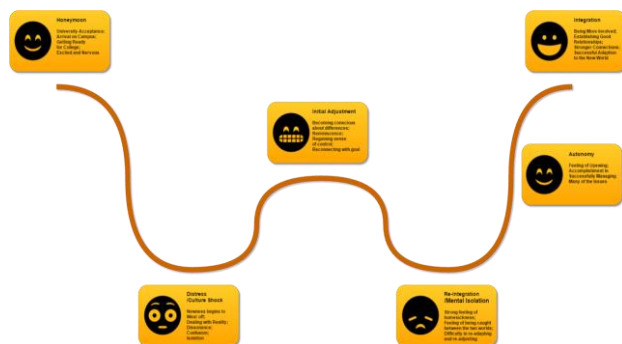

Figure 1.1 The W-Curve of Cultural Transition by *Zeller and Mosier (1993)*

5 Results

Asian students of a U.S. university were asked about their experiences of transition from their home culture to the host culture while studying in the U.S. For the sake of respecting students' confidentiality, all the original names of the interview participants have been changed in the results while reporting and analyzing their feedback.

5.1 Arrival

This stage begins with students getting admission to the university and their arrival on campus. It continues as they prepare for their first few weeks in college. The foreign students in this stage are likely to feel both excited and nervous. Along with excitement, students also feel homesick. *Priyodorshini*, *Arhaan*, *Irene*, *Shahida*, *Shumon*, *Evelyn*, *Disha*, *Farid*, and *Waseem* (not their real names) moved to the U.S. for a better future (through education), as the U.S., according to many of them was, a land of opportunities.

This stage hovered around two things — excitement, and a feeling of being overwhelmed. They were excited about attending college in the United States, and meeting new people in a new culture. The interviewees also felt overwhelmed due to loneliness after they set foot on foreign soil. Priyodorshini said:

> *I was overwhelmed because it was a new country for me and this was the first time I had set foot out of my country. I was happy that I got to come to the United States for my studies because, getting an admission here is a challenge and I had worked hard for admission.*

For Waseem, the honeymoon stage was more about excitement and meeting new people in a new culture:

> *We expected we will meet new people from different cultures and diverse people from many countries that we don't get to meet in Kuwait.*

5.2 Shock Sets In

At this stage the newness begins to wear off once international students start to deal with reality and adjust to a new life. Cultural differences may make international students feel confused and isolated as they miss their family and friends.

Among the interviewees for the study, Irene had always lived with her family. Living away from her loved ones was not easy for her. She would cry and did not want to stay in the U.S. Her apartment was far away from school; she had to daily commute large distances. Moreover, regular fights with her roommate was a major turn-off for her that made her first semester miserable. She said:

> *…for the first semester you have this excitement then slowly reality sets in and you know that life is not easy here… you have to work hard, you have to work late at night.*

Shahida left her children in her home country when she came for a Ph.D. to the U.S. She was homesick in the United States. Upon arrival Disha was thrilled because everything seemed new. For the initial six to seven months, she was anxious about the difficulties in getting medical help for her baby. For Farid, who was a doctoral student in the U.S., learning to drive was a major stressor for him because he did not drive in his home country. A few of the interviewees said they had a hard time adjusting to the transport system in the U.S. Evelyn said about her home country's transportation:

> *We have a very convenient mass transportation system. Here I felt really inconvenient when I did not have my car.*

Priyodorshini felt overwhelmed due to living alone and not knowing her neighbors. Disha did not have friends in the U.S. for a long time. A feeling of skepticism swept through her as she, just like Priyodorshini and Evelyn, did not feel comfortable talking to or socializing with a non-native person (i.e., people from the host culture) for a long time because they feared their inadvertent expression of anything inappropriate to the host culture might be considered impolite.

Both Priyo and Disha appreciated the host culture's respect for privacy and personal space yet they also felt that it could both be good as well as bad. Disha missed out on being part of a community that she used to sense back home:

> *Some things that I missed was the community feeling that you get when you are with the people that are from the same culture… the festivals, the events, the spirit that I had for Indian festivals and Indian culture.*

This is the period where homesickness increases. An international student in a foreign nation maintains strong ties with his home country. Priyo said:

I actually called my parents every day for the first three (to) four years... I think I called them every day and I talked to them... that was, my way of connecting with something familiar.

Though all the participants were appreciative of privacy in the host culture yet they realized it could also be a double-edged sword for them. Coming from a collectivist culture, they missed the family ties. This was very much about staying in touch with the family and friends. They also missed the friendly and respectful relationship that they had with their teachers back home. Besides privacy, many interviewees found the nuances of language a hurdle. For instance, Arhaan was given hot chocolate in a cup when in fact he wanted a cookie. In his native country India, chocolate refers to a cookie.

Language barrier seems apparent when Asian students come to study in the U.S. Most of them from childhood get used to the British style of spelling and accent in English, but in the U.S., it is quite different. Even the local dialect is distinct from what a foreign audience is used to. When Priyo landed at the Newark airport, she asked an African American person for directions and his accent confused her:

I told him to repeat it but I still didn't get it so I started crying because I thought that I was here for my studies and now I didn't even understand English.

She later got used to the accent by watching news and other shows on television.

The participants talked about the stress of living alone. Priyo, Disha, and Waseem talked about missing out on having good friends and the difficulties that came with it. The coping strategies to combat this phase of loneliness were: 1) Attending different kinds of public or private events (like religious festivals, picnics, pool parties, valentine's dinner, basketball game, etc.) where they could meet new people; 2) Immersing themselves in ample course work.

5.3   Becoming Familiar

In this stage students become conscious about the differences between what they were used to at home and the university life in the host country. Remembrance of what one was used to and reconnecting with what one values most in his life happens in this stage.

Priyo, Waseem, Disha, and Arhaan realized that the nature of teacher-student relationship in their home countries was more personal and caring, which was a stark contrast to the professional nature of the teacher-student relationship in the U.S. Arhaan said:

In India, human relations are long term; nothing is short term... according to the Hindu culture, they say 'Matridevbhav, pitridevbhav, gurudevbhav'... (meaning) see God in father, mother, and teacher.

Priyo and other participants like Waseem, Disha, Farid, Shumon, and Arhaan felt celebrating their religious festivals in the U.S. was different

from doing so in their home countries because they did not get holidays for the festivals. Instead, they had to go to the university for classes. Because all the Asian students in the sample did not get religious and cultural holidays, they had to make do with low-key celebrations.

5.4   Trapped Between Two Worlds

In this stage, students go home for an extended period. They feel homesick. College life still is not as comfortable as home used to be, and home now is not as familiar as it once was. The feeling of being trapped between the two worlds — a sense of not completely belonging to either --- makes students feel isolated. Arhaan explained:

I do not feel comfortable because I miss my parents, I miss those long term relations, I miss everything that India stands for. I even miss the politics of the Indian sub-continent.

Farid, who lived with his parents in Bangladesh, keeps a target of visiting his home country once every two years. Here in the U.S., he experienced mental isolation when he was alone dreaming of flying back home. He realized the warmth of his parents that he had been missing when he got up from sleep.

5.5   Taking Control

Feelings of upswing occur when students are successfully able to manage many of the challenges faced during culture shock in this stage. Students gain confidence with the new routine and their ability to handle the challenges posed by the academic and social settings. Extroverts reach the initial adjustment stage quicker than introverts. Most respondents in the present research said that their stay in the U.S. had made them independent and able to take up challenges. Priyo felt that five and a half years of studying in the U.S. had taught her to be independent. She said:

It has shaped me into who I am today. I have matured a lot over time that would not have had happened if I lived with my family.

5.6   Blending in

As students become more involved in the university life and begin to establish good relations in the host country they feel more connected to the university. Connections to campus become stronger as one becomes more involved in campus activities, in developing stronger friendships and connecting with faculty and staff. The students feel successfully adapted to their new world. At this stage, the culture of their home nation becomes somewhat foreign. There is less dependence on parents and former peers.

After staying in the U.S. for a while, Priyo does not call her parents as often as she used to. She said:

I still do that but not that frequently maybe once a week... And now they sometimes

*call me on the Internet like Google
Hangout.*

Farid would try to learn good values from the U.S. culture, while leaving out values that he said were bad. Irene involved herself with activities of international students' associations and enjoyed meeting new people, learning about their culture, and trying out different cuisines at international festivals on the university campus. For Disha, the initial unease to talk to people from the host culture disappeared after living in the U.S. for some time. Her initial unease to talk to people from the host culture went away when she decided to overcome her hesitation and talk to students from the host culture in her class. She realized that it was not too difficult to mingle with people from different cultures.

6   Discussion

The W-Curve theory of transition propounded by Zeller and Mosier (1993) is a predictable pattern of stages of occurrence of culture shock that a person experiences. They talked about six stages that occur whenever a person goes through the phenomenon of culture shock. They found that the W-Curve theory could be applied to the first-year college students while they go through the phases of adaptation to the host culture. It is normal for the students to experience the roller coaster ride of ups and downs while they adjust to the new culture. Knowing about the W-Curve could make their transition easier. Analyzing the interview feedback in the present study, exemplars could be easily drawn to match their experiences according to the stages outlined in the W-Curve by Zeller and Mosier (1993).

The findings of the present study indicate that the six stages laid out by the authors of this study closely match the six stages laid out by Zeller and Mosier (1993). The present study is different from Lin's (2006) study with regard to coping strategies of international students. While Lin (2006) argued that international students should interact more with other international students from their home country, the researchers of the present study found that coping strategies involved socializing more with members of the host nation. None of the participants in the present research acknowledged the role of their university in helping them overcome culture shock. The researchers of the present study believe that ideas gleaned from the interviews would further facilitate academic accomplishment for international students if they follow the W-curve of transition to cope with culture shock. Most of the participants interviewed have been living in the U.S. for at least five years. A few of the participants who were from India and Bangladesh had not travelled to their home nations since they came to the United States. The other students, however, had visited their home country after they came to the U.S. Therefore, it can be construed that most of them have lived through the adjustment cycle successfully and dealt with cultural challenges in the host nation.

Culture shock is a consequence of various things. Not everybody will see the same occasions as a trigger. Culture shock may be due to the absence of learning or questioning the way of life in the host nation. To help international students successfully negotiate culture shock the authors of the present study recommend the following: An international student should do a little research about host culture. The more a student gets to know about host culture, the better one will comprehend the way things are. When the international students get to the host nation they should consult their instructors and their classmates from their home nation to overcome culture shock. Having self-belief goes a long way in successfully facing cultural challenges. One should try to be intelligent when attempting to understand a host nation's cultural issues, for instance table manners.

International students should not hesitate to act in accordance with their instincts. However, an international student should be careful to not hurt the sentiments of a person from the host nation. One needs to be circumspect and considerate. It is inappropriate to go around bashing the host nation's way of life and culture; it won't help one feel better if one tries to do so. International students should instead strive to learn from the host nation's culture to adapt and thrive in a new culture.

7   Conclusion

The present study would enable prospective students planning to travel abroad to know that it is not unusual to expect a roller coaster ride in a foreign land. The prospective students would learn to encounter and appreciate different cultural values in host nations. Based on the findings of the present study, it will be advisable for universities to pair international students with host families to help the students smoothly blend into a new culture. The host families will be able to help international students better negotiate the host nation's culture. Having the Universities departments for international student development (specifically geared towards facilitating the international students' transition from the home country to the host country) improved, should make a proactive effort in organizing orientation sessions mainly focusing on the phenomenon of culture shock and arranging several briefing sessions for the incoming students to help acclimatized with the new environment. There should be international showcasing sessions like national themed programs where international students could be introduced to the host country students.

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