

2406156 Ako Uno ECSO5006 Assessment 2

This report critically examines the necessary steps for conducting a successful small-scale research project with a specific group, focusing on a topic relevant to them. It also considers the role of the researcher in the process, including ethical considerations and how the findings can be appropriately shared.

1. Introduction

• Background and purpose

This study aims to explore the cultural gaps and intercultural experiences faced by international students studying in Japan, as well as the processes through which they adapt to these challenges.

According to Tran Hoang Nam and Jin Cheng-Hai (2022), in response to globalization and increased international competition in the field of education, Japan has actively promoted the acceptance of international students since the 1990s. Over

the past decade in particular, the number of international students in Japan has increased significantly. However, questions remain regarding the extent to which these students are genuinely accepted and integrated into Japanese society and academic institutions (Tran Hoang Nam & Jin Cheng-Hai, 2022).

International students often face cultural gaps in various areas such as language, daily customs, and values. These challenges may have a considerable impact on their academic performance and mental well-being. Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify specific examples of the cultural gaps experienced by international students in Japan and to examine how they adapt to these differences in their daily and academic lives.

• **Significance of the Study**

According to Li *et al.* (2021), as the number of international students increases in China, there has also been a growing concern about mental health issues such as depression among this population. This highlights the increasing importance of supporting the psychological well-being of international students. Furthermore, Oduwaye, Kiraz, and Sorakin (2023) note that although international students often face a range of difficulties and challenges while adapting to new cultural

environments, little progress has been made in addressing these issues over the past 21 years. In particular areas such as psychological and financial hardship remain under-researched, a situation that is also relevant in the Japanese context.

Given these circumstances, it is essential to gain a deeper understanding of the psychological burden and adaptation processes experienced by international students through direct engagement with them. Such insights are crucial for universities, local communities, and governments seeking to develop effective support systems. Therefore, this study aims to provide foundational knowledge that can inform future support measures for international students in Japan.

2. Cultural Adaptation of International Students in Japan

Research Plan

• Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore and gain a deep understanding of the cultural gaps faced by international students in Japan, as well as the processes and strategies they use to cope and adapt. Specifically, this study focuses on the difficulties international students encounter in an intercultural environment, such as language barriers, differences in human relationships, and divergent values, and how

they overcome these challenges. To achieve this, the study sets the following two research questions:

- (1) What cultural differences and value discrepancies do international students experience in Japan?
- (2) How do international students adapt to these differences?

3. Data Collection Methods

• Sampling

According to Subedi, K. R. (2021), purposive sampling is one of the most applicable and relevant techniques in qualitative research. It is noted that its aim is not to generalize the research results. Subedi (2021) also points out that, in large sample studies, data collection through continuous engagement may not be possible, which often leads to a superficial understanding, limited to surface-level data.

For this study, 10 international students will be recruited with the help of the international student centers or international exchange departments of Japanese universities. The decision to recruit students through personal introductions is based on the aim to avoid a sample limited to specific interpersonal relationships. Since the study focuses on understanding the difficulties faced by international students in

building relationships in an intercultural environment, it is essential to collect a wide range of opinions from students with diverse backgrounds and social circles. Additionally, considering that the study aims to understand how international students experience intercultural challenges and how they adapt to these cultural gaps, it is necessary to select students who have been in Japan for a certain period. According to Yurui Shang (2022), Torbiorn's (1994) model suggests that after the first stage of fascination, there is a period of culture shock. As several months pass, emotions tend to become more positive, and satisfaction increases. Subjective adaptation is thought to be achieved by the end of the first year (Shang, 2022). Moreover, according to Lysgaard's U-Curve model of cultural adaptation (Lysgaard, 1995), after passing through the honeymoon and culture shock stages, individuals gradually begin to adapt to the new environment and accept cultural diversity. Eventually, in the phase of mastery, individuals' ability to function in the new culture improves gradually. Based on these models, the students selected for this study will have been in Japan for at least six months. Additionally, it is essential to select students from different cultural backgrounds, not just from Asia but also from Europe and the Americas. This is important as cultural gaps and adaptation processes, such as language barriers, differ according to cultural backgrounds. Furthermore, the

students selected for the interview should be able to communicate in either Japanese or English, as it is crucial for the researcher to understand and allow the students to freely express their experiences and emotions in a language they are comfortable with.

• **Conducting Interviews**

In this study, qualitative data will be collected through interviews with the participants. The interviews will be conducted primarily in an online format via Zoom, with each session lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes in a one-on-one setting. To capture non-verbal information such as facial expressions, participants will be requested to keep their cameras on during the interview. Additionally, all interviews will be audio-recorded. According to Tanaka *et al.* (2021), one of the advantages of conducting online interviews is that the specific physical location or environment chosen by the researcher may not significantly influence the content of the interview. Moreover, Nehls *et al.* (2015) suggest that since research participants typically select their own locations for participating in the study, the comfort of their chosen environment may encourage more candid and open responses.

The interviews will be semi-structured, allowing for flexibility in the

conversation. Depending on the participant's preference, the language used will either be Japanese or English. As Ruslin, Mashuri, Rasak, Alhabsyi, and Syam (2022) explain, semi-structured interviews enable participants to express their viewpoints more freely, in contrast to standardized questionnaires. Additionally, this format allows researchers to ask follow-up questions, thereby delving deeper into the participants' experiences while maintaining a consistent framework for the interview (Ruslin *et al.*, 2022). This approach ensures that the interview remains both flexible and aligned with the overall research objectives.

4. Ethical Considerations and the Role of the Researcher

- **Informed Consent**

In this study, participants' rights and privacy were respected, and ethical considerations were thoroughly observed. Prior to conducting the interviews, the purpose and scope of the research, as well as the intended use of the data, were explained to participants via Zoom. Additionally, participants provided consent online through a PDF document. They were informed beforehand that they had the right to withdraw from the interview or retract any statements made at any time. It was made clear that participation was entirely voluntary, and they could choose to

participate or decline without any pressure. Furthermore, participants were notified in advance that all interviews would be audio-recorded, and their consent was obtained for this as well.

• **Protection of Data Anonymity and Privacy**

Great care was taken to ensure the anonymity and privacy of the participants in this study. Ayling and Mewse (2013) discuss the ethical challenges specific to online interviews, highlighting the use of encrypted chat tools, free email accounts for anonymity, and providing information about support services in case of emergencies. Tanaka *et al.* (2021), in their detailed discussion on the methodology and ethical considerations of online interviews, reference the British Psychological Society's (2017) "Ethics Guidelines for Internet-mediated Research." They note that online interactions can result in permanent records of information, which can create privacy concerns, especially when interviewees perceive the interaction as private. To address these concerns, Tanaka *et al.* (2021) recommend including features such as a "finish" or "withdraw" button, along with clear contact information for follow-up after withdrawal.

In line with these ethical guidelines, any personally identifiable information,

such as names or institutional affiliations, was removed from the interview data, and the findings were reported in a way that ensures participants' anonymity. All audio recordings and transcriptions of the interviews were stored in password-protected files. Additionally, participants were asked to use free email accounts for communication, and contact details were provided so that they could withdraw their consent or retract statements even after the interview had been completed.

- **Positionality and Bias Awareness**

To prevent the researcher's relationship with the participants and cultural background from influencing the interpretation of the data, the international students selected for this study were from universities other than the researcher's own institution. This approach helped prevent responses that may have been influenced by a desire to accommodate the researcher or by the omission of information due to the shared institutional affiliation. Additionally, the use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to speak freely, and during the interviews, the researcher made sure to show empathy and react to the participants' responses without interrupting or influencing their narratives. In the data analysis phase, the researcher avoided conducting the analysis alone. Instead, the analysis was carried out in collaboration

with a supervisor and other faculty members to prevent biased interpretations and ensure a more balanced perspective through peer debriefing.

5. Data Analysis and Reporting

• Data Analysis Methods

In this study, the thematic analysis method proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was adopted to analyze the data obtained from the interviews with international students. Initially, the researcher repeatedly read the transcribed interview data and coded notable features across the entire dataset. Next, the codes were grouped into potential themes, and all data relevant to each theme were collected. The researcher then checked the consistency of the initially identified themes with the entire dataset and made revisions as needed. Through continuous analysis, the content of each theme was refined, and clear definitions and names were assigned to each theme. Finally, the detailed findings of each theme were compiled into a report, and the results were interpreted in relation to the research objectives and background.

• Reporting Results

This study collected and analyzed specific examples of psychological challenges, such as anxiety and difficulties, faced by international students in Japan, exploring how they overcame them or were unable to. These real-life experiences were seen as valuable for improving future support for international students. The findings were compiled into a report and submitted to relevant institutions, including the International Student Center and the International Affairs Office. The report outlined the adaptation processes and psychological challenges of international students, along with suggestions for improvement and strategies to address these challenges. Sharing this information aims to enhance understanding and foster more effective support for international students.

Based on the identified anxiety factors, university orientation materials for international students were also reviewed. By including past examples of cultural adaptation and culture shock experiences, along with situations where support was needed, the goal was to build a support system that helps students confidently engage in their studies abroad. Additionally, providing information on coping strategies and counseling services was intended to encourage students to take proactive steps in resolving issues independently.

Through this, the goal was to establish a continuous support system where the

experiences of past international students help improve support for future students.

• **Limitations and Reliability of the Study**

According to Nagashima (2015), qualitative research has gained attention, and evaluation criteria are being established, including the four standards proposed by Lincoln & Guba (1985) — Credibility, Dependability, Confirmability, and Transferability. This study applied these criteria to ensure research rigor.

To enhance credibility, participants' feedback was incorporated into the analysis. Transferability was ensured by selecting international students from diverse cultural backgrounds, making the findings applicable to others. Dependability was maintained through detailed documentation of the research process, and confirmability was ensured by involving third-party verification during data analysis.

However, a limitation of this study is the language barrier, as interviews were conducted only with students who could communicate in Japanese or English. This may have hindered the ability to obtain in-depth responses from non-native speakers, limiting the depth of their insights.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the cultural gaps faced by international students in Japan and examined the processes through which they adapt to these challenges, focusing on how they cope with psychological difficulties and intercultural stress. The findings suggest that many international students are likely to encounter obstacles such as language barriers and differences in cultural values, requiring them to actively engage in adaptation strategies to overcome these difficulties.

The practical insights gained from this research are expected to serve as foundational resources for universities and local governments aiming to enhance the quality of support for international students. In particular, the findings can be used to improve psychological care and strengthen broader social support systems for intercultural adaptation. Future research should focus on developing more concrete support measures that help students overcome language and cultural barriers, as well as systems that effectively reduce their psychological burden.

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