

Valuing Cultural Diversity:
The Academic Adjustment Experiences of
Undergraduate Chinese International Business
Students at Victoria University

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Declaration of Originality

Except where reference is made in the text of the thesis, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis presented by me for another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgements in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

Signature:

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Abstract

International students have diverse needs when undertaking education in Australian universities. It is in the interest of both international students and the host institution to ensure these students achieve success in their studies. This study builds on previous research and explores, from the students' perspective, the academic adjustment experiences of undergraduate international Business students from Chinese Confucian heritage cultural backgrounds at Victoria University, Australia. A qualitative methodology, using principles of grounded theory, was used for the study. Individual in-depth interviews were conducted for data collection. The transcribed data was analysed under focus questions and themes identified in the literature review using open and fixed grids.

The dissertation documents the academic experiences of the cohort of students studied, focusing on the significant cultural factors which impinged on their adjustment; and discusses the emerging patterns, processes of the adjustment, strategies for future students to adjust well, and implications for curriculum development and delivery. The results of this study have suggested that cultural and educational backgrounds play a significant role in students' adjustment. The systematic building by academics and administrators of formal and informal mechanisms in Australian universities, which value students' cultural diversity and develop inclusive curricula, is to enrich the learning experiences of all students.

Glossary

Adjustment is defined as ‘a process of fitting individual or collective patterns of activity to other such patterns carried out with some awareness of purposefulness’ (Macquarie Dictionary 1991). *Adjustment* is used to refer to students making changes in their attitudes, behaviour and social norms in order to fit into the new study environment at Victoria University.

Adjust is defined as ‘to change slightly, especially, in order to make suitable for a particular job or new conditions. Adjustment is the act of adjusting’ (Longman Dictionary 1988).

Transition The term is used to refer to the change for students to university study from their previous study, work or home duties. It is used in First Year Transition, or transition to university study.

Chinese students The term is not confined to geographic location, in other words, it is not limited only to students from China. It refers to international students coming from Chinese Confucian heritage cultures. Therefore, international students from Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, People’s Republic of China, Taiwan or Thailand are defined as ‘Chinese students’ for this study. Chinese students from migrant families who were born in Australia are not international students according to the definition above, so they will not be included in this study, although they might have similar backgrounds and adjustment experiences. The term *students from Chinese Confucian heritage cultures* is also used to refer to this group of students (Please refer to *Chinese Confucian heritage cultures*).

Chinese Confucian heritage cultures Biggs (1996, in Watkins and Biggs, eds) used the term to refer to students from countries such as China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia or Korea, with Confucian heritage cultures. In this dissertation, it is mainly used to refer to the cultures in countries such as China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Malaysia, and the related educational values.

Commonplaces of education The four commonplaces of education (Schwab 1973) are in terms of *the student, the teacher, the curriculum and the milieu*.

Course codes Abbreviations were used for Business courses in Victoria University. The course codes used in this thesis are listed below:

BBAA Course code for Bachelor of Business in Accounting.

BBAB Course code for Bachelor of Business in Banking and Finance.

BBAC Course code for Bachelor of Business in Catering and Hotel Management.

BBAN Course code for Bachelor of Business in International Trade.

BBAT Course code for Bachelor of Business in Travel and Tourism.

Culture is defined by Barrett (1991) as ‘the systems of agreed-upon meanings that serve as recipes, or guidelines, for behaviour in any particular society.’ Terpstra and David (1991) warn that cultural misunderstandings cause problems ‘stemming from differences in values and codes of behaviour’ between parties involved in inter-cultural communication. They believe that: ‘Culture is a learned, shared, compelling, interrelated set of symbols whose meanings provide a set of orientations for members of a society. These orientations, taken together, provide solutions to problems that all societies must solve if they are to remain viable’ (p.6).

In this study, the use of the term *culture* is based on a combination of both of the above. Culture includes belief, values, tradition, behaviour, codes of practice, social norms which members of a society share in their daily life.

Hakka A dialect used by local Fujian Chinese in China and overseas Chinese over the world.

Hokkian A dialect used by local Fujian Chinese in China and overseas Chinese over the world.

International students According to its use in literature, the term refers to students who live away from their home country. The terms ‘foreign students’ and ‘overseas students’ are also used in literature to refer to international students.

Interview schedule An interview schedule was used to structure the interviews (Appendix B). Five focus questions have been prepared, having as the themes of the students’ (i) previous educational experience, (ii) perceived differences between studying in Australia and in their home countries, (iii) experiences in adjusting academically and culturally to study in Australia, (iv) opinions on adjustment difficulties, and (v) advice to new students to facilitate success of adjustment.

NESB Non-English speaking backgrounds.

Victoria University (VU) VU is the newly determined name for the former Victoria University of Technology (VUT), in which this study was initially carried out.

Year of Course The required number of years for a student to complete a course. It is normally three years for a Bachelor degree. It is four years for Bachelor of Business in Catering and Hotel Management (**BBAC**) and Bachelor of Business

in Travel and Tourism Management (*BBAT*) courses as students were required to have one year compulsory industrial training.