THE ROLE OF SOCIO-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON ACADEMIC SUCCESS

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Abstract: This article focuses on the psychological adjustment of international students and the impact of socio-cultural differences on their academic success. Students entering a new culture for study and life, especially being outside their familiar social and cultural environment, face challenges that test their psychological state, emotional, and cognitive stability. This article theoretically examines the main factors of psychological adjustment in international students, including socio-cultural differences, stressors, and their influence on academic achievement. Specifically, it analyzes how socio-cultural differences and psychological stress affect students' academic performance and their success in the learning process. The article also offers suggestions for improving psychological adjustment and developing students' coping skills to deal with stress.

Keywords: international students, psychological adjustment, socio-cultural differences, stress, academic success, psychological support.

The accelerating process of globalization is leading to large-scale changes in the field of education. In particular, the increasing flow of international students is marking a new stage of transnational integration in the education system. Students from various countries are forced to adapt not only to a new academic environment but also to new social and cultural conditions. In such a situation, students face not only academic problems but also psychological pressure, cultural conflicts, and identity crises.

For international students, the process of adapting to a new socio-cultural environment directly affects their psychological state and academic success. Therefore, this topic has been actively researched in recent years in the fields of psychology, sociology, and pedagogy. Studies show that socio-cultural differences, communication barriers, and the weakness of integration mechanisms in the host society lead to stress, loneliness, anxiety, and depression among international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Furthermore, the adaptation process for international students occurs in two dimensions: psychological and socio-cultural. Psychological adjustment refers to how an individual responds to stress in a new environment, how they behave, and their level of coping with problems. Socio-cultural adjustment, on the other hand,

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describes the process by which students adopt the values, norms, and social behaviors of the new society (Ward et al., 2001). A comprehensive analysis of these two aspects allows for a deeper understanding of the relationship between the overall adjustment of international students and their academic success.

This article analyzes, based on theoretical sources, the role of socio-cultural differences in the psychological adjustment process of international students and how these factors influence their academic success. The main purpose of the article is to identify the psychological challenges in the adaptation process of international students, explain the role of socio-cultural differences, and theoretically justify how this process affects educational outcomes. This article is written based on a theoretical-analytical approach, drawing upon existing scientific articles in international literature, psychological theories, and empirical research findings. Additionally, scientific works related to the experiences of international students studying in higher education institutions of Uzbekistan have also been analyzed.

There are several main theoretical approaches to the psychological study of international students, each of which serves to explain different aspects of the adaptation process. This section will highlight the impact of socio-cultural differences on psychological adjustment and academic success based on these theories.

Cultural Adaptation Theory. According to this theory (Berry, 1997), international students utilize four main strategies when adapting to a new culture: assimilation, integration, marginalization, and separation. Each strategy has a different impact on psychological well-being. Students who choose integration adapt more successfully because they strive to harmonize the new culture with their own. This reduces stress and positively affects the academic process.

Stress-Adaptation-Growth Model. This model, proposed by Kim (2001), describes the stress experiences of international students, their coping strategies, and the resulting psychological growth. In the initial stage, students may experience stress, but over time they begin to adapt to the new environment. This model explains how the mental health of an international student stabilizes over time.

Socio-cultural Adaptation Theory. Developed by Ward and Kennedy (1999), this theory views psychological and socio-cultural adaptation as two independent yet interconnected processes. Socio-cultural adaptation is the process by which international students adopt the values, norms, and social rules of the new environment, which determines their ability to interact with the host society. Psychological adaptation, on the other hand, is related to an individual's emotional state and how they feel. These two types of adaptation are key indicators determining the success of international students.

Academic Adaptation and Interdependence. Socio-cultural differences create specific obstacles for international students in the academic environment. Language barriers, differences in teaching styles, evaluation criteria, and cultural differences in expressing opinions freely in the classroom cause considerable psychological discomfort (Andrade, 2006). This situation leads students to underestimate their academic abilities and experience a decrease in self-confidence. Consequently, problems in psychological adjustment negatively impact academic success.

For international students, the process of adapting to a new country is complicated not only by cultural differences but also by the interconnectedness of psychological well-being and academic performance. Psychological adjustment is an individual's emotional and cognitive adaptation to a new environment, shaped by socio-cultural differences, language barriers, loneliness, distance from family and friends, as well as the stages of learning a new education system (Zhou et al., 2008).

International students often experience culture shock as they adapt to their new environment. This shock stems from not knowing how to behave in the new society and how to navigate the new education system. Psychological states such as stress and depression are also associated with the difficulties of self-recognition and building social relationships in the new environment (Searle & Ward, 1990).

Culture shock represents the psychological state that arises during the process of adapting to a new culture. When international students leave their home countries and enter a new social and cultural environment, they encounter various difficulties. Culture shock typically develops in four stages: initial contact with a different culture, difficulties and stress, cultural adjustment, and integration into the society.

When students enter a new culture, they are first introduced to a new language, customs, traditions, and values. Initially, this stage can be interesting and exciting for students as they are curious to explore the new society. However, they may also feel uncomfortable.

In the new environment, students may feel lonely, face language and cultural barriers, and experience difficulties in communicating with locals. During this process, students may struggle to accept cultural differences and miss familiar surroundings, family, or friends. This, in turn, increases psychological stress and reduces self-confidence.

As students become more familiar with the new environment and accept some cultural differences, they begin to adapt more to the situation. In this stage, students may make new friends, understand the new culture, and try to integrate into it. However, this process takes time and varies for each individual.

After successful cultural adaptation, students begin to feel completely free and comfortable in the new society. At this stage, they participate more in social

activities, make new friends, and feel like a part of the community. However, reaching this stage is not always easy, as it requires fully accepting and adapting to the new culture.

Culture shock can cause high levels of stress and anxiety in students. This is especially true due to feeling lonely in a new environment, limited social connections, and language barriers. During the culture shock process, students may feel anxious, experience depression, hopelessness, and a lack of self-confidence. These psychological vulnerabilities also affect academic performance.

Social isolation in a new society, meaning separation from friends and family, leads to a student feeling lonely. This situation, in turn, worsens the student's psychological state and reduces their self-confidence.

Culture shock affects a student's academic success because the process of adapting to a new culture increases stress, which hinders the student's learning and academic activities. During the culture shock process, students may face difficulties in understanding the new education system and academic approaches. Such situations, in turn, negatively impact academic outcomes.

However, successfully overcoming culture shock helps students develop their emotional and cognitive stability and can positively impact their academic success. Supportive systems and psychological assistance at all stages of culture shock can greatly benefit students.

International students often encounter unfamiliar cultural codes, customs, and social interaction systems. Studying intercultural differences, Hofstede (2001) showed that the dominant values in each society—such as individualism and collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance—determine how an international student behaves in a new society. International students studying in Uzbekistan, especially those from African or South Asian countries, keenly feel these cultural differences. For example, academic culture requirements such as establishing free communication with teachers in class, expressing independent opinions, and actively participating in discussions create psychological discomfort for some students (Andrade, 2006). This situation lowers their self-confidence, limits social interactions with teachers and classmates, and intensifies stress.

Several studies show that psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and culture shock are common among international students (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). These negative states are particularly strong in the initial stages of study, and the adaptation process begins over time. However, it has been found that the level of psychological well-being plays a significant role in this process. Students with stable mental health achieve greater academic success because they tend to establish active social connections in the new environment, utilize resources, and develop independent learning strategies.

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A report by the American College Health Association (2021) emphasized that international students face more challenges in psychological health compared to domestic students. This directly limits their academic performance. This situation is also observed in higher education institutions in Uzbekistan.

The role of social competencies is considered important in the psychological adjustment process. If a student possesses skills such as self-expression, understanding others, managing emotions, and making adaptive decisions in problematic situations, they integrate more easily into the social system (Spencer-Oatey & Xiong, 2006). In this regard, creating opportunities for psychological services, group counseling, and participation in social activities for international students in educational institutions is of great importance.

Students' interactions with each other, participation in voluntary activities, and involvement in cultural exchange programs accelerate their socio-cultural adaptation. In this process, teachers' empathy, cultural sensitivity, and friendly approach also play an important role (Marginson, 2014).

In recent years, the higher education system of the Republic of Uzbekistan has been consistently implementing reforms aimed at increasing the number of international students and aligning the quality of education with international standards. However, psychological support systems for international students are not yet sufficiently developed. Although psychological services exist, there are problems regarding the scope of their activities and intercultural competence.

It is important to understand how international students adapt to a new culture and how they respond to changes in their study and living environment. This process depends on many psychological and social factors. For example, separation from one's own culture, difficulties arising in language and communication, the new system of study and academic requirements, and the influence of home and family can complicate psychological adjustment (Berry, 1997).

Socio-cultural differences play a fundamental role in the psychology of international students. Their emotions, such as apprehension towards a new culture or anxiety about a new social environment, possess unique characteristics. For example, Uzbek students studying in Europe may encounter new societal norms, customs, religious beliefs, family values, and social responsibilities (Ward et al., 2001). These differences not only affect academic success but also personal development and psychological well-being.

During the social integration process, students develop new social strategies to adapt to cultural changes. This includes making new friends, learning the language, and finding their place in the new society. These processes can be a source of stress for students, but social support systems, friends, and psychological assistance help students navigate this process more easily (Gudykunst, 2004).

International students face a range of social and psychological factors in order to achieve success in their studies. Their academic success largely depends on their psychological state, social integration, and cultural adaptation. Additionally, language proficiency, adaptation to the learning environment, and teacher-student relationships also play a significant role (Chirkov & Safdar, 2012).

Away from their own culture and society, international students must strive to adapt to a new academic system. This process sometimes leads to stress and anxiety for students. To achieve academic success, students must succeed not only in their academic pursuits but also in their social and psychological well-being. Educational institutions and psychological support systems can help students manage stress (Misra & Castillo, 2004).

Universities play a significant role in supporting cultural integration and psychological adjustment for international students. Psychological aid and support systems help students feel comfortable in their new environment and in their self-awareness. Universities provide support to students through psychological counseling, seminars, group work, and social programs. These programs help students manage their stress, adapt to the new environment, and develop interpersonal relationships (Cushner & Mahon, 2002).

There are several effective ways to assist international students. For example, organizing cultural integration courses and activities for new students at universities, facilitating language learning, involving them in cultural activities, and providing psychological support services. It is also necessary to help students establish social connections with local communities, mentor them, and develop successful academic strategies for them (Gibson, 2005).

In this article, the role of socio-cultural differences in the psychological adjustment of international students and the impact of this process on academic success have been thoroughly illuminated based on theoretical sources. The research results indicate that adaptation to a new social and academic environment for international students is not just a process of studying or learning a language, but also encompasses complex psychological and emotional states. They encounter factors such as culture shock, loneliness, stress, anxiety, and low self-esteem, which directly affect their learning process.

The link between psychological well-being and social competencies has also been recognized as a key issue. Socially active, emotionally stable, and culturally sensitive international students are much more successful in their studies. In the adaptation process, the psychological support role of educational institutions and society is of great importance, and based on this, the following recommendations can be put forward:

1. **Strengthen the psychological support system.** Higher education institutions should establish separate intercultural psychological counseling centers for international students. These centers will support students in coping with stress, depression, and culture shock.

2. **Implement cultural inclusion programs.** Educational institutions need to organize programs that enhance social integration for international students—intercultural exchange, friendship clubs, mentoring systems.

3. **Increase the cultural sensitivity of teachers.** Educators should have a psychologically sensitive approach and understand cultural differences when working with international students. Special training and seminars can be organized for this purpose.

4. **Develop language and academic skills.** Along with language training for international students, it is necessary to organize special courses aimed at developing skills such as academic writing, presentation skills, and critical thinking.

5. **Support opportunities for communication with family and friends.** During long-term studies, educational institutions should consider providing accommodation and communication facilities to ensure that international students have the opportunity to stay in touch with their loved ones.

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