**Betwixt and Between: A Qualitative Review of the (Re)acculturation of International Students and Returnees**

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## Abstract

Pre-pandemic, the international education marketplace was expanding rapidly along with cross-border educational mobilities. Researchers have explored the adaptions of international students to study destinations, notably within an acculturation framework. However, researchers have given less attention to adapting to life in the country of origin that international students encounter as returnees. It is commonplace for returning graduates to transition from higher education to employment. Despite such challenges, few studies have investigated how international students reintegrate into the job markets of their home countries. In this paper, we discuss the current state of relevant research on acculturation and reacculturation and provide a foundation for future research. Finally, theoretical and practical contributions in the field of counselling and guidance are provided.

*Keywords:* international students, returnee, international higher education, acculturation, reacculturation, job market

## Introduction

The forces of globalisation have provided an impetus for the progressive internationalisation of higher education. Higher education institutions are increasingly enrolling students from overseas, and a growing share of prospective higher education students are opting to study abroad. The number of international students in higher education globally exploded over two recent decades, growing from two million in 1999 to five million in 2016 (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018). These trends have prompted researchers to explore the experiences of international students undergoing a process of acculturation to their study destinations (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). In fact, their experiences of being displaced from familiar environments and of being exposed to diversity involve an adaptation process and changes to their

cultural and personal outlooks (Brown, 2009). When leaving their study destinations and returning from abroad, these students undergo a further process of adaptation to life back in their countries of origin. This process is often described as reacculturation (Arthur, 2003). Returning graduates frequently transition from higher education to employment.

The acculturation process forms an important part of reacculturation. For example, the initial culture shock experienced by international students on entry relates to the phenomenon of reverse culture shock experienced upon returning from overseas (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). The two concepts of acculturation and reacculturation need to be analysed in tandem. In this paper, we first review existing research on the acculturation of international students to their study destinations. We then proceed to review reacculturation studies to investigate how such principles of acculturation apply to the context of returning to the country of origin. Finally, we review studies that have addressed the reentry of returned graduates to the job markets of their home countries.

International students opt to study overseas in part because of an expectation about improved career opportunities (Davidson & King, 2008). They believe that an international qualification provides a competitive edge in the job market by impacting positively on their careers and employability (Nilsson & Ripmeester, 2016; QS Intelligence Unit, 2018). Indeed, Crossman and Clarke (2010) claimed that Australian employers attach high value to international experience amongst graduates since it is associated with enhanced cultural understanding, soft skills development and foreign language acquisition. Although returning graduates gain long-term career-related benefits from overseas study, they often face challenges on their return, such as reverse culture shock, poor networks, unrealistic job expectations, challenges in communicating with colleagues (Baláž & Williams, 2004; Robertson, et al., 2011; Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Zweig & Han, 2010; Hao et al., 2016; Pham, 2017).

In light of these considerations, this paper contributes to scholarship by investigating the reacculturation process experienced by returned graduates and, in particular, with regard to their entry into the job markets of their home countries. Suggestions are provided for future research. In this paper, we do not make any distinction regarding the (re)acculturation of students on short-term study-abroad programmes and international full-degree students. In the literature review, (re)acculturation theories are applied to students and graduates who have undertaken both short- and long-term studies abroad, mainly in the USA, Europe, Australia and Asia (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007; Gaw, 2000; Tharenou, 2015).

## Methodology of the Review

Conducting a qualitative review on acculturation and reacculturation required reviewing the relevant literature on acculturation, re-entry, cultural contact and repatriation. Since a variety of research traditions have been deployed to address these topics, it is not possible to use a common set of criteria for purposes of interpretation. Our aim is to present the broad context around international students' reentry into their home country's job market. The literature review helps to

identify research gaps by explaining what prior researchers have "accomplished previously, allowing for consolidation, for building on previous work, for summation, for avoiding duplication and for identifying omissions or gaps" (Grant & Booth, 2009, p. 97). Szkudlarek's (2010) review of the reacculturation literature has exemplified how this can be accomplished by conducting a so-called "unsystematic" literature review.

The method adopted here may be susceptible to some selection bias, with our personal research histories and interests influencing the selection of publications. In fact, one of the authors (KS) is now working in a third country following completion of her doctoral thesis, which focused on the entry of Chinese returned graduates into the Chinese job market after studying in Australia. Another author (CM) is currently working overseas following completion of her doctoral thesis, which focused on acculturation and higher education mobility. Therefore, the literature review could have been restricted to topics that mirror our experiences as overseas students and graduates as well as our own research.

Two main search engines were used to source online peer-reviewed journals and books: Google Scholar and the online library–integrated search engines of our respective universities. More than 130 articles were reviewed. Articles were searched according to keywords that the authors had identified as "the primary concepts or themes of the topic under study" (Green et al., 2006, p. 108). To investigate issues of acculturation, we used 'intercultural adaptation', 'intercultural contact', 'cultural contact', 'adaptation', 'adjustment', 'culture shock', 'cross-cultural learning', and 'acculturation'. To search for publications regarding reacculturation, we used 'reentry', 'reacculturation', 'reintegration', 'reverse acculturation', 'repatriation', and 'reverse culture shock'. To further focus the research on the population of interest, the above keywords were subsequently combined with 'students', 'international students', 'graduates', 'returned graduates', 'returnees', and 'sojourners'. Finally, we included keywords that could lead the search towards studies concerning reacculturation to the job market: 'labour market', 'job market', 'work', 'job', and 'employment'.

## The Acculturation of International Students to their Host Culture

### How the Acculturation concept has evolved

Any experience involving transitory yet prolonged exposure to diversity and displacement from a familiar environment can trigger a process of adaptation and can change cultural and personal outlooks (Brown, 2009). Initially, research focused on adapting to diversity, referred to as 'culture shock' (Pedersen, 1995). 'Culture shock' is an expression that was introduced by Oberg (1960, p. 177) and is defined as the 'occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad', exacerbated by the loss of all familiar cues of social interactions. Culture shock is triggered by intercultural contact, which occurs when culturally, ethnically, or linguistically different individuals or groups meet (Ward et al., 2001).

In early research, culture shock was defined as a predictable progression of events. Notable examples include Oberg's (1960) identification of phases of culture shock (i.e. honeymoon, aggression, humour, and adjustment/acceptance); and the U-adjustment model proposed by Lysgaard (1955). Though there was widespread and lengthy acceptance of the U-curve model, it

failed to account for individuals' different personalities or to capture the complex nature of a person's life (Brown & Holloway, 2008). Some early studies focused on medical and mental health issues as a consequence of migration (Zhou et al., 2008). With this aim in mind, Furnham and Bochner (1986) advocated more psychologically sound investigations of culture shock that recognise adjustment as a learning process and therefore as nonlinear and dynamic (Gao & Gudykunst, 1990). Fine-tuning of the terms 'adjustment' and 'adaptation' represented a step in this direction, with the latter superseding the former. Adjustment implies that acculturating individuals or groups change to accommodate their environments. In reality, they may either distance themselves from the host environment or try to change it (Berry, 1997). Hence, the term 'adaptation' is better suited as a representation of the process triggered by intercultural contact.

Research about culture shock gave way progressively to discussions about acculturation (Berry, 1997). Put simply, acculturation refers to "all the changes that arise following 'contact' between individuals and groups of different cultural backgrounds" (Sam, 2006, p. 11) as well as to the process of negotiating the retention of one's own culture and the adoption of another's culture (Berry, 2006). According to Berry's acculturation model (Berry, 1996; Berry, 2005), home culture orientation and host culture orientation are the two strategies used by immigrants when living overseas. Those who are home culture oriented nurture their own cultural heritage, and when they are host culture oriented, they engage with the foreign culture they are experiencing. Although the acculturation concept arose from the study of migration-related phenomena, it has increasingly been considered relevant for explaining the experiences of international students. International students have been understood as a fast-growing migrant category (Beine et al., 2014; King & Gardiner, 2015).

**International Student Acculturation**

There has been extensive investigation of international students' social interactions and their relationship to acculturation processes and outcomes (Beech, 2014; Kashima & Loh, 2006; Sakurai et al., 2010). Hendrickson et al.'s (2011) study undertaken at a university in Hawaii found that participants who reported more friendships with host country students than with students from their own country were more satisfied and socially connected. Ramsay et al.'s (2007) study at an Australian university found that better-adapted international students reported higher levels of social companionship support. Furthermore, international students' adaptation to a U.S. college predicts better levels of participation in leisure activities such as sports and social events (Gómez et al., 2014). These studies have concluded that social recreation and leisure occasions can alleviate and prevent negative aspects of adaptation to college. In studies conducted in Russia, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Australia, the US, New Zealand, Canada, and several European countries, other factors potentially determining the success of the acculturation process include perceived cultural distance (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007), acculturative stressors (Yang, et al., 2016; Akthar and Kröner-Herwig, 2015), issues related to the meaning of life (Pan et al., 2008; Pan et al., 2007), resilience (Pan, 2011), homesickness (Hannigan, 2005), personality traits (Jang & Kim, 2010), and national self-image (Brown & Brown, 2013).

Research has focused on acculturation as a predictor of the well-being of international students in their study destinations. In studies conducted at UK (Ayantunji, 2018; Ramos et al., 2016) and Chinese (Jiang et al., 2020) universities, curricula and pedagogy, discrimination, language, and lack of social life were identified as barriers for the well-being of international students. Some studies have connected acculturation and perfectionism with stress levels amongst Asian international students (Nilsson et al., 2008). Bertram et al. (2014) and Chun et al. (2017) found that certain acculturative stressors, such as language difficulties and feelings of disconnection, made it difficult for Chinese students to establish social support networks during their overseas sojourn. In contrast, a successful adaptation at an Australian university had a positive relationship with trust between domestic and international students and decreased negative discrimination (Guillen & Ji, 2011).

Research on the role that acculturation plays in the well-being of international students provides evidence that acculturation can also determine the level of use of university-provided support resources (both psychological and pedagogical) (Frey & Roysircar, 2006; Li et al., 2016; Naijian & Dixon, 2003; Quan et al, 2016). Li et al. (2016) found that the use of professional counselling services by Chinese international students studying in the US was influenced by the level of acculturation and language proficiency. Finally, researchers have also addressed the impact of successful acculturation on satisfaction with the international education experience in U.S. classrooms (Wadsworth et al., 2007). Brown and Holloway (2008) discovered that the initial stage of overseas studies was not characterised by the 'honeymoon' phase, as suggested by the U-curve model. The most predominant feelings among international students in the UK were rather negative and associated with culture shock. Therefore, support services at the university should respond to international students in their first weeks when they have a significant need for support.

With a few exceptions (Ayantunji, 2018; Ramos et al., 2016; Quan et al., 2016; Rasmi et al., 2009; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2014), most studies on international student acculturation have one methodological similarity: they involved surveys with a single data collection episode. Since data that are collected regularly and longitudinally are better suited to chronicling events as they unfold, longitudinal studies would be more appropriate for acculturation since it in constant change (Hughes & Emmel, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2014).

Most of the relevant acculturation studies were conducted in Western countries, with a preponderance of universities in the United States, along with examples from Australia and the UK. The most frequently researched international students are from East Asia, and particularly from China. Exceptions include a study of exchange students to Russia (Galchenko & van de Vijver, 2007) and international students to Asian host universities (Pan et al., 2007; Pedersen et al., 2011; Shafaei et al., 2016; Jiang et al., 2020).

The literature discussed thus far concerns the acculturation experiences of international students in their study destinations. However, mobile students, upon returning home or even by merely maintaining strong links with nationals at home, contribute to knowledge absorption, technology

advancement, and capacity building in their countries of origin (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 2018). Students undertake higher education abroad to enhance their careers and employability (Nilsson and Ripmeester, 2016; QS Intelligence Unit, 2018); thus, it seems timely to investigate how expectations about careers and employability unfold after graduation and upon reentry.

## The Reacculturation of Returned Graduates to Their Home Culture

### Reacculturation and its evolution

While there has been extensive research on adapting to destination cultures and on acculturation (Wu & Wilkes, 2017), the topic of reacculturation has been largely neglected by researchers (Chiang et al., 2018; Szkudlarek, 2010). A better understanding of reacculturation would assist repatriates in their personal and professional development. More research on repatriation also offers the prospect of contributing to the development of human resource management programmes for this particular employee group.

Synonyms of reacculturation in the literature include 'reverse culture shock', 'repatriation', 'coming home', and 'going home' (Berry, 2005; Gaw, 2000; Kostohryz et al., 2014; Sussman, 1986; Werkman, 1980). Reacculturation includes dealing with the difference between expectations and the reality of returning to one's home country (Kostohryz et al., 2014). Arthur (2003) noted that reacculturation is a psychological process rather than a physical relocation to one's home country: "Reacculturation begins during the process of leaving the host country and continues through the time that it takes for international students to adapt to life at home" (p. 175).

Though the literature on reacculturation is sparse, researchers began to investigate the effects of reacculturation on international students after they completed their studies overseas as early as the 1960s. Sussman's (1986) review of the literature on reentry research revealed that a few anecdotal and empirical studies have investigated the reacculturation of international students who had returned from the US and/or other countries. Scholars have examined the impact of 'reverse culture shock' on international students returning from their studies in the US, the UK, and Australia, Cuba and Costa Rica (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Gaw, 2000; Sussman, 1986; Wielkiewicz & Turkowski, 2010; Presbitero, 2016; Dettweiler, 2016). Gaw (2000) defined reverse culture shock as "the process of readjusting, reacculturating, and reassimilating into one's own home culture after living in a different culture for a significant period" (pp. 83–84). Researchers have demonstrated that international students experience not only culture shock at their study destinations but also reverse culture shock upon returning home (Presbitero, 2016), even when returning from study-abroad experiences as short as six months (Dettweiler et al., 2015). Some issues associated with reacculturation shock include academic problems, cultural identity conflict, depression, anxiety, and interpersonal difficulties (Henderson, 2011; Şahin, 1990). Similar to culture shock, early researchers viewed reverse culture shock as a U-shaped process and even expanded the model to a W-shaped process (Gullahorn & Gullahorn, 1963). The adaptation

required by contact with a foreign culture generally declines shortly after entry into a destination, followed by a recovery stage as adaptation increases. The traveller undergoes a further decrease in adaptation after returning home, followed by a recovery stage.

Some travellers may never fully recover from their initial culture shock (Şahin, 1990). The 'shock' of reentry may exceed the initial adaptation to a foreign country in terms of seriousness and may require lengthier adaptation (Şahin, 1990). Dykhouse and Bikos (2019), in a 15-country study, have argued that the students who adapt more strongly to their host country experience more culture shock upon return. Butcher's (2002) study on East Asian international students likened reacculturation to a grieving process: "Returnees are grieving the loss of friends, experiences, and, to a certain extent, a way of life" (p. 356). International students from U.S. and U.K universities described their culture shock as a feeling of internal conflict (Christofi & Thompson, 2007). They described reentry as being overwhelming and felt impelled to move back to their host countries. Wielkiewicz and Turkowski (2010) and Brabant et al. (1990) reported that women who studied different overseas countries experienced more stress, anxiety, and family-related problems than their male counterparts, indicative of likely gender related differences. Similarly, non-married Indonesian returnees seemed to experience more distress upon returning to their home countries compared with married returnees (Andrianto et al., 2018). By contrast, Pritchard (2011) and Takeuchi et al. (2001) found no significant evidence of psychological reacculturation problems amongst Taiwanese and Sri Lankan graduates returning from overseas studies in Western countries, but rather sociocultural and political issues associated with the tension between modernism and traditionalism.

Several researchers have discussed whether the host university should provide counselling support for international students by regarding their transition process and helping them to cope with inner conflicts about whether to return home or to remain abroad (Christofi and Thompson (2007), Arthur (2003), and Matic and Russell (2019). Kostohryz et al. (2014) suggested that counsellors should develop self-help groups in which international students can connect and share experiences. Furthermore, Gaw (2000) suggested that home universities should develop cultural orientation modules and social events that assist students returning from a short-term study-abroad programme, thereby overcoming their reverse culture shock. Interestingly, Gaw (2000) observed that returnees with higher levels of reverse culture shock make less use of university services than those with lower levels of reverse culture shock. This finding prompted Presbitero (2016) to suggest that universities should engage in proactive assurance that support programmes and services reach the most needy students. The host university should be involved in the reentry process of exchange students and international full degree students, not only the home university. Matic and Russell (2019) have emphasised that international students whose social statuses are treated differently in their home and host countries (i.e. in the cases of physical ability, gender roles, sexual orientation, and so on) need special counselling at their host universities before returning home to be prepared mentally for the prospect of reverse culture shock.

Brubaker (2017) proposed a critique of the reentry literature, arguing that the reacculturation literature has focused more on the challenges and less on the benefits of returning home. Back et al. (2021) and Conceição et al. (2021) agree that re-entry can have benefits as it allows returnees to develop a more critical and reflective orientation to cultural differences and an appreciation and gratitude for their home culture. Furthermore, changing study-abroad patterns are demonstrating that the long-established assumptions about reacculturation could be outdated. As the use of contemporary technologies has intensified, returnees can remain connected with their families and friends when studying abroad and with their newly acquired foreign friends after returning home. Brubaker (2017) has contended that studying abroad is no longer a 'once in a lifetime' experience but rather the beginning of an international career and lifestyle. Finally, with the current COVID-19 pandemic, much education has moved online or become hybrid, hence stripping the international educational experience of the value and challenges of living in another country and equally those of returning home. This pandemic may therefore also change our understanding of reacculturation in the context of international education.

**Reacculturation of Returned Graduates to the Job Market**

Only a few researchers have focused on reacculturation by international students to the home job market (Baláž & Williams, 2004; Robertson et al., 2011; Pham, 2017; Pham and Saito, 2020;Sonnenschein et al., 2019; Singh, 2020; Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Zweig & Han, 2010; Langi,2 016; Strachan et al., 2007; . Andrianto et al., 2018; Hao et al., 2016). Apart from a few exceptions (Baláž & Williams, 2004; Strachan et al., 2007), most of the relevant literature has focused on graduates from East and Southeast Asian countries returning from university studies in Western countries. These graduates were working in various fields such as language teaching, academia, hospitality, finance, business, commerce, insurance, media, public relations (PR), advertising, information technology, and logistics/transport.

A study on Slovakian students who had returned from short term overseas studies in the UK concluded that the qualities of self-confidence, learning adaptability, and flexibility that had been acquired via overseas study were highly valued in the home job market (Baláž & Williams, 2004). Graduate respondents who returned to Singapore after studying in Australia claimed that the skills acquired overseas had long-term transformational benefits, such as "long-term career goals, personal development, and new perspectives on life and work" (p. 695), rather than more immediate benefits (Robertson et al., 2011). In contrast, several authors claimed that Chinese and Vietnamese returnees face challenges in the job market because of their struggle to readapt to Chinese/Vietnamese culture, the rigid working conditions, stereotypical perceptions of Western education, and unrealistic expectations (Hao et al., 2016; Pham, 2017; Pham and Saito, 2020; and Sonnenschein et al., 2019). Furthermore, Chinese returned graduates often lack a strong social network (guanxi) after long absences overseas, which is considered another barrier to employment ( Singh, 2020). Although most Chinese returnees find jobs within three months and often adjust well to their workplaces (Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Zweig & Han, 2010), Hao et al. (2016) claimed that they are frequently critical of the quality and working standards of the Chinese workplace.

Hao et al. (2016) have also urged that organisations and governments need to develop policies to recruit and retain returnees, given that returnees from emerging economies, such as Vietnam, often intend to reexpatriate upon their return because of life and career dissatisfaction. Likewise, Langi (2016) and Tharenou (2015) have suggested that workplaces need to support returned graduates. Tharenou (2015) has claimed that realistic job expectations during the selection process, induction programmes, and training opportunities can help to prevent Chinese returnees from suffering from reverse culture shock and challenges in communicating with colleagues. The feeling of professionalism among returnees seems to have a positive influence on their readaptation to the workplaces of their home countries. Therefore, workplaces should improve the sense of professional identity of their employees who have returned from overseas (Andrianto et al., 2018). Finally, Strachan et al.'s (2007) study on Vanuatu female graduate returnees demonstrated the need for these women to undertake internships or voluntary work during vacation in their home country to establish a network, which will facilitate their job search after the completion of their studies. NGOs and donors need to prepare these women with CV preparation and job application skills before and after returning home.

The identified empirical literature on returnees' reacculturation to the job market consists of both qualitative and quantitative approaches; it consists of either surveys or interviews or mixed methods. Furthermore, the research is conducted at one time point or over a period. However, there were no longitudinal studies – none investigated the same population over several years.

## Conclusion

This paper has provided information on the current state of the academic literature on international students' acculturation, reacculturation, and entry into the job markets of their home countries. The evidence presented allows a conclusion that more investigation is needed about the reentry of international students (Wu & Wilkes, 2017). The same applies to effective mechanisms that empower graduates to manage their transitions back into their home countries (Presbitero, 2016). To our best knowledge, only a few studies have considered returned graduates' reacculturation to the job markets of their home countries (Baláž & Williams, 2004; Hao & Welch, 2012; Katz, 2010; Langi, 2014; Tharenou, 2015; Tharenou & Seet, 2014; Zweig & Han, 2010; Pham and Saito, 2020; Pham 2017). These studies indicate the challenges faced by returned graduates during reacculturation to the job market and the scarcity of models and strategies that facilitate their reacculturation process. We recommend that researchers address the reacculturation of returned graduates to the job markets of their home countries. The literature on acculturation to study destinations has provided models and strategies to improve the process and reduce acculturative stressors. A similar approach to the study of returnees' reacculturation would benefit governments and organisations to effectively leverage the returned graduates and prevent their impending departure (Christofi & Thompson, 2007; Langi, 2016; Tharenou, 2015; Tharenou & Seet, 2014). For the preceding reasons, it would be timely to investigate topics concerning training, induction programmes, and mentoring in the workplace for returnees.

**Data Availability Statement**

| Availability of data | Template for data availability statement | Policy |
|---|---|---|
| Data sharing not applicable – no new data generated | Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study. | All |

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