

## A STUDY ON ADJUSTMENT STRATEGIES OF THE KURDISH INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS EXPERIENCED CULTURE SHOCK IN THE UK

(لێکۆڵینەویەکی لە ڕیگاگانی خۆگونجاندنی خوێندکارانی کورد که روبەروی شوکی کلتوریی له ولاتی بەریتانیا بونەتەوه)  
(LÊKOLÎNEKE LI SER STRATEJIYA ADAPTASYONA XWENDEKARÊN KURD ÊN  
NAVNETEWÎ LI BRÎTANYAYÊ YÊN KU ŞOKA ÇANDÊ JİYAYE)

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### کورتە

ئەم توێژینەویەکی لە ئەزمونی شوکی کلتوری و ڕیگاگانی خۆگونجاندنی خوێندکارانی کوردی کوردستانی عێراق لە ولاتی بەریتانیا دەکۆڵێتەوه. ئامانجی توێژینەویەکی بریتیه له خستەرووی لایەنگی ژبانی ئەم خوێندکارانە که هەستیان بە شوکی کلتوری کردووە بەهۆی جیاوازی نیوان کلتوری کوردستانی عێراق و ولاتی بەریتانیا، هەروەها دەستتێشانکردنی ئەو ڕیگاگانەکانی که بۆ ڕاهاتن لە ژینگە نوێی ئەکادیمی بەکاریان هێناوه. میتۆدی توێژینەویەکی چۆنیی ئەزمون و خالی هاوبەشی ژبانی خوێندکارەکان لە زالبون بەسەر شوکی کلتوری دا وەک کەمەستە سەرەکی، لە ڕیگای هەندێ پرسیاری پێوەندیدارەوه، شێدەکاتەوه، ئەنجامەکان دەریدەخەن خوێندکارەکان بە زمان و کلتور و خەڵک و سیستمی خوێندنی زانکۆ لە بەریتانیا ئاشناپێتان لە ناستی پێویست دا نیه کاتیگ دەگەنە ئەو ولاتە، بەلام نامادەبی تەواویان نیشان داوه که تیکەلی خەلکی بەریتانیا و کلتور و زمانەکیان بین. هەروەها خوێندکارەکان رازین لە سیستم و خزمەتگوزاریەکانی زانکۆ، ئەمەش هەلی سەرکەوتن و زالبون بەسەر کیشەکان دا دەرخسینیت. **وشە کلێبەکان:** خوێندکارانی کورد، شوکی کلتوری، ڕیگاگانی خۆگونجاندن، خوێندکارانی نیودەولەتی لە بەریتانیا

### Abstract

The present study investigates the experience of Culture Shock by Kurdish international students in the UK and the main adjustment strategies the students take to become familiar with the new culture and education system. The aim of the paper is to explore the life of these students in terms of culture shock and the ways the students mostly use to adapt to the new academic environment. The qualitative approach of the study identifies major themes and topics shared by all five participants who were interviewed on the basis of some relevant questions. The findings indicate that unfamiliarity with the English language, culture, people and education system is the major problems; however, the Kurdish international students were ready to interact with British people and expose to the language and the culture. The students were also satisfied with the UK university teaching and service.

**Keywords:** Kurdish students, culture shock, adjustment strategies, international students in the UK

### Kurte

Armanca vê xebatê lêkolînkirina çanda xwendekarên Kurd yê navneteweyî ku li Brîtanyayê tecrûbekirine ye. Ev xebat, stratejiyên ku xwendekarên kurd ji bo adaptasyona çanda nû û pergala perwerdehiyê

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bikaranîne kîjan e lêkolîn dîke. Yek jî armanca vê xebatê keşf kirina teşeya jîyanê ya di bin bandora şoka çandî de mane û keşf kirina entegrasyona nîvenga akademîk a nû ye. Nêzîkatiya nitel ya vê xebatê ev e, di bin bingeha hin pîrsan de bi riya hevîtinê bi pênc kesan re tema û mijar hatiye parvekirin. Encama xebatê nişanê me dide ku ger mirov aşîyanê zîman, çand, mirov û pergala perwerdehiya îngilîzan nebe ev tişt dibin sedemên pîrsgîrêkên xwendekarên. Lê belê xwendekarên kurd yê navneteweyî bi îngilîzan re rola ragihanderî girtine ser xwe û çand û zîmanê van naskirine. Di heman demê de xwendekar, ji xizmeta û perwerdehiya zanîngehên Brîtanyayê xweşhal mane.

**Kilîtbêje:** xwendekarên kurd, şoka çandî, stratejiyên adaptasyonê, xwendekarên navneteweyî li Brîtanyayê

## 1. Introduction

It is common for people who sojourn to another culture or country to experience culture shock. International students contribute greatly to the number of individuals who spend a certain period of time in a different culture. The numbers of Kurdish international students in the UK have increased recently. The problems that arise from living in a new culture sometimes give people, the students in the current study, a feeling of shock. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to examine the experience with regard to cultural adjustment of the Kurdish students in the UK and particularly what their problems are and which strategies they use to cope with culture shock. It seems relevant and significant to pinpoint the areas of concern of the participants and their way of addressing them. The present study is about the culture shock experience of a handful of Kurdish international students living in the UK for educational purposes. This is going to uncover some aspects of the topic and it can be considered as the first study focused directly on the strategies of overcoming the cultural shock.

## 2. Understanding Culture Shock

When people move from their home country to a new country or to a new culture, they feel culture shock. They take all the relevant scripts, habits, conversational routines of the home country with them. As a result, it is predictable to have unintentional clashes with the new or host culture.

Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005: 115) state that culture shock is about 'the stress and the feeling of disorientation' individuals undergo when they 'move from a familiar environment into unfamiliar one'. It is 'an emotional experience' that becomes 'intense emotions'. Then it changes to 'behavioural confusion' as a result of disorienting the patterns of thinking. Thus, the individual's identity seems to be 'stripped of all protection'. It becomes difficult to function in the 'new cultural setting'. Today more than any other time seems to be considerably important to tackle the issue of culture shock and the way it can be overcome because the connection among the countries around the world has become extremely strong.

The term cultural shock was coined by an anthropologist 'Oberg' (1960). There have been many researches in this area since then. This implies that there is no consensus what the concept of culture shock exactly is. Furnham (1988) points out that this disoriented period have a negative impact such as psychological stressful time, refusal by the host culture and the loss of identity. The latter appears in various form and ways; people in the host culture feel deprived from their values as a general concept, become confused and live a powerless life.

Moreover, there is another view which categorises this shock in terms of its affective, behavioural and cognitive impacts (Ward et al, 2001). To be specific, the initial bewilderment and anxiety which everyone in a new culture is highly likely to experience refer to the affective dimension of culture shock. Furthermore, the behavioural disorientation results from the confusion that is the outcome of the mix of the rules and norms of two different cultures. In addition, individuals in this sense cannot hold the appropriate communication. Specifically, they seek to find a proper way to maintain the conversation. If they could not, they try to end it at any cost. This might happen mostly when there is a necessity to use nonverbal language in the interaction which is not easily controlled by some of the people who are suffered these difficulties (Bochner, 1986: 48).

It is important to remember if this is the case, how individuals can cope with or manage it. This is really fundamental because if we are able to manipulate this shock, it could change from unpleasant period of time into positively productive experience. So, there is at least a general agreement that the cultural shock have disadvantages as well as advantages (Ting-Toomey and Chung, 2005). The benefit of this shock is seen when it is managed successfully. As a result, sojourners feel comfortable in the new culture and become competent in their everyday interaction. They tolerate ambiguity and experiment new opportunities in the new culture. These all positively force these individuals to become a better person.

There are also several factors which influence this experience and differ on the level of individuals. The followings have been found: sojourner's directional motivation, the individual's expected future, the degree of difference between the two cultures, psychological adaptation, sociological familiarity and individual characteristics.

Ward (1996) points out that the intentions to travel and live in another country are various, and this has profound effect on the way the new culture is being viewed. Taking two examples helps us to understand it better. International students and immigrants both go through culture shock. The international students have dreamt to be in a new culture and they move to another country based on an educational purpose. They have prior general knowledge and may have at least limited ability to use the main language of the host culture. This makes cultural adjustment easier. On the other hand, although most of the immigrants suffer too much so as to get to safety, most of them usually become isolated as they are undocumented and unable to follow their dreams upon arrival to the new country. It means the more difficulties immigrants have, the worst their culture shock is going to be and take a long period of time to overcome it.

Furnham and Bochner (1982) note that sociocultural dimension of the adjustment can be considered as a major factor and this refers to the ability that newcomers need to interact and befriend with host nationals. The appropriateness of this interaction is essential because if something goes wrong, it impacts the whole life of newcomers for a very long period of time. The newcomers realise the need to respect values of the host culture; at the meantime, they socialise successfully as much as they can if they keep a balance between the values of the two cultures. Additionally, international students are also easily able to build friendship with citizens of diverse background in cities that are considered a cosmopolitan such as London.

Ward *et al* (2001) address the psychological issues such as stress, low self-esteem and intrapersonal confusions and confirm that these issues affect the well-being of newcomers. Therefore, cultural adjustment strategies are necessary and they can be divided into two types: primary and secondary. The primary strategies can be described as avoiding intrusive and stressful environment. This is more behavioural-driven actions which act like managing some hostile situations and buying some time to be prepared cognitively. Hence, cognitive changes are required to happen, secondary but essential in nature, in order to support already taken strategies. The outcome of these processes is the change that occurs in the perception of the newcomers towards culture shock; from mere optimism into an enhanced optimism about self, others, and the everyday surrounding. The feeling of stress or loss in the host culture is definitely replaced by appraisal of the new environment (Chang *et al*, 1997 and Cross, 1995).

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Participants**

There are five main participants taking part in this study. They are all male Kurdish, from Iraqi Kurdistan region, international students and study master degree at the University of Nottingham. The participants are introduced by numbers (e.g. participant 1, 2...) so as to keep their identity anonymous. They belong to different fields of study, participant 1 is studying engineering; three participants (2, 3 and 4) in linguistics and participant 5 is majoring in advanced computer science. All the subjects are granted a scholarship, funded by Iraqi Kurdistan regional government, to study in the UK. Their age ranges from 25 to 33 years old (mean= 29). Their stay in the UK is different from each other, and it is between 10 to 16 months living in the UK.

#### **3.2 Materials**

After reading and reviewing several articles about the cultural adjustment related to international students (Ward *et al*, 2001; Constantine, 2005, and Fritz *et al*, 2008), a brief guideline for the interview, as the main tool of this qualitative study, was developed. This is done with the great help of an interview conducted prior the actual interviews. This secondary interview was done with another Kurdish student who is named participant 6. He describes his experience of culture shock in general and adaptation to the UK in particular. This interview takes 12 minutes and it was beneficial in some ways such as showing that there is a match between what he said as an example of a Kurdish student about different stages of culture shock he has been through and what Ting-Toomey and Chung (2005) have presented in their model.

#### **3.3 Procedures**

The participants for this study were chosen based only on their ethnicity and they took part in this study voluntarily, meaning that there was not any inducement in return to their involvement. In addition, their English language proficiency was taken into consideration and these participants can be seen as an able speaker to express what the questions might require to say in a specific period of time.

Their interviews were recorded by a smartphone which guaranteed the clearness of the voice. On average, each participant was interviewed for 4.23 minutes. After this, the recordings were fully transcribed. Furthermore, the qualitative analysis was carried out, starting with finding out about the common topics or domains which the participants share.

The final list of the areas of concern was as the following: (1) language and culture learning; (2) lack of friendship and (3) studying in a new academic environment. Moreover, the guide framed by Hill *et al* (1997) has been taken into account to a certain extent in analysing the data.

It appears that Kurdish international students in Nottingham city have adjusted culturally. There are three shared problems given above. These are inadequate familiarity with culture and language, feeling of alienation and novelty of academic system.

#### **4. Results and Discussion**

##### **4.1 The problems**

The first problem is the lack of knowledge about language and culture. These two components were mentioned together because all participants show a tight connection between these two. Second participant expresses the importance of knowing the language of the host country at the beginning of the interview and he describes his situation when he arrived at the airport:

There were lots of problems; the first one is the language. When you land at the airport, you don't know where to go? How to get a taxi? Where to live? Where is the hotel? .... Another thing which is related to the language is culture.

This participant illustrates very well how someone feels when you arrive at the host country. He clearly states that language was his first problem and then he describes the state that newcomers face firstly. This is supported by other participants' comments on the same issue. For example, the fifth participant says language 'definitely' facilitates understanding culture. This is the time that you have many questions. Their answers do not help you very much because each question is rooted deeply in the host culture. Thus, it appears that there is a consistency between what he claims and the result of some studies that have been done on the case of international students. Fritz *et al* (2008) list language as the first problem, and then other issues such as making new friends. Moreover, Mori (2000) gives language the first position of unique problems that are significant barriers to the intercultural adjustment. Furthermore, Cadieux *et al* (1986) adds more to the emphasis of the role of language in this phenomenon and they point to the direct connection between language and performance of students in academic context and outside the university campuses. Therefore, language is needed to be 'hand in hand' with the culture, the fifth participant adds.

Social life; moreover, comes as a second matter that the participants were concerned about. These students feel the lack of friendship. They all comment that it was 'difficult to get British friends'. They add that if you have British friends, it 'makes you to get information about English language as well as English culture', the fifth participant notes. Additionally, one of the participant, the third one, views 'nearly impossible to make British friends'. Therefore, they feel isolated especially when they had started their studies. This is hard because when you come overseas, you miss the family and friends. So to compensate that, you try to fill the gap, but it is not easy to find new friends (Williams, 2005: 367). The main reason why they thought it is relatively impossible to have British friends refer to the big difference that can be seen

between the British culture and the Kurdish one. The third participant uses an expression 'totally different' when he compares the two cultures.

Furthermore, Another major thing which makes the experience of Kurdish international students complex is that they came to the UK, not only the culture is quite new, but also the academic system is more advanced compared to the one at the Iraqi Kurdistan Universities. The second participant views the uniqueness of the UK teaching system in terms of who is the centre of teaching. He labelled the education system in Iraq as a teacher-centred; whereas, the British one a student-centred. This is likely an anecdotal classification, but the fifth participant also makes a similar comment when he states 'the students here are at the centre of an intensive study program'. In addition, Participant 4 defines this move to study in a new academic system as 'tectonic shift'. Fritz *et al* (2008) and Mori (2000) mention this involvement in a new academic culture as one of the sources of stress, and this contributes to the escalation of the level of culture shock.

#### 4.2 The Strategies

Empirical evidence has proposed some regulations that help people to manage cultural differences which cause culture shock in most of the cases. Matsumoto *et al* (2007: 82) identified four effective ingredients, related to people in a foreign culture, to overcome such differences. These are 'emotion regulations, critical thinking, openness, and flexibility'. These are all helpful in terms of empowering individuals in a host culture. In particular, controlling emotions, which include keeping the negative emotions towards the new culture under control, is the key to become a flexible and open-minded person in viewing both our and host cultures critically. However, no matter how many strategies and regulations are available to people or students, it does matter how they are going to manipulate them. There have been a number of models with regard to strategies (e.g. Carver *et al*, 1989). It is noted that individuals pick up the strategies based on their psychological well-being. The more negative a student's construal of a new culture would be, the more difficult it is to take an adjustment strategy. Cross (1995) adds that the cross-cultural unfamiliarity is the source of stress, and sojourners select and adopt a strategy successfully when they are likely familiar with the host culture.

In the previous section, it appeared that the problems that Kurdish international students faced were related to language and culture, lack of friends and studying in the UK academic system. Therefore, they needed to do an action or take certain strategies to lessen the impact of the culture shock. They thought it is a matter of fact that communication with the host nationals accelerates the rate of familiarity with the language and culture. The fourth Participant 'went to city centre and began to interact with people'. This male participant initiated the most effective step towards embracing the new culture. His determination to succeed in cultural adjustment paves the way to lessen cross-cultural unfamiliarity. During the interactions with local people, he knew that it is important not to disturb people by speaking to them randomly; at the same time, exposing to local people and their culture to a certain extent. However, it was mentioned earlier that these students could not get British friends, and it was somehow

difficult to find English people to talk to. As a result, they state that watching TV and videos from YouTube are the two main sources they depend on to overcome lack of English friends. The second participant prioritises this strategy as he comments ‘the best way to learn and improve English language is to watch TV programs’. Furthermore, the students also tried to become friends with other nationalities living in the UK such as Arab, Chinese, Pakistani, Indian, and Turkish students. One of the participants ‘had the only, but golden chance to make friends with other nationalities’. This has two fold; in one hand, it is useful to have friends, get socialised, and exchange ideas about the host culture; on the other hand, it sometimes harms the English language proficiency of the international students because they do not get English language input from British people. Moreover, it seems that sharing the same religion helps to find friends as two participants asserts this importance of this topic. One of them points out that ‘he began to contact Muslim students. This helps in filling the gap of having English or British native friends’. The chance that they may have met British Muslim students is highly likely as the university has an active Islamic society whose members are from diverse ethnic backgrounds.

As far as the education system is concerned, the students come to the UK to earn a degree and go home that is why they study ‘day and night’. The service to ask the university staff whenever they feel uneasy with the academic system is available most of the time. One of the participants praised his lecturers who provided excellent teaching and academic advice. The participants become more engaged by asking questions and getting responses from their teachers. The fourth participant ‘began to be more interactive in terms of questioning and asking the lecturers for providing information about the education system’.

### **5. Conclusion**

The problems and strategies have been discussed in reference to the culture shock experienced by Kurdish international students in the UK. It appears that these students have managed to cope with learning English language and have tried their best to familiarise with the British culture. The lack of British friends came as the second source of problems, but the students were creative in interacting with many people. The participants also benefit from the university services and resources and they enjoyed the excellent teaching environment. International Kurdish students are advised to do research better before coming to the UK so as to quickly become familiar with the new culture.

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