

NAVIGATING THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ACCULTURATION

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Abstract: This thesis foregrounds the human dimension of international student acculturation - the lived emotional, identity-related, relational and agentic experiences that quantitative adjustment scores alone cannot capture. Building on contemporary acculturation theory, it proposes a four-dimension framework for understanding acculturation as a dynamic, non-linear journey of personal meaning-making, and outlines its implications for student support in higher education.

Keywords: international students, acculturation, human dimension, belonging, identity, resilience, student support, higher education

Problem and rationale

The rapid internationalization of higher education has produced a large and growing population of students who cross cultural borders to study abroad; globally their number surpassed 6.9 million in 2022 [1]. Much of the research on this population has measured acculturation through standardized adjustment indices, yielding valuable but partial pictures [2]. What such indices tend to under-represent is the human dimension of the experience - the texture of belonging and loss, the renegotiation of identity, and the everyday acts of resilience through which students author their own transitions. Because international students constitute a particularly vulnerable group during this transition, reducing acculturation to a score risks obscuring the very phenomenon it seeks to describe [3].

Aim

The aim of this thesis is to articulate a conceptual framework that places the human dimension at the centre of international student acculturation, and to draw out its practical implications for the psychological and pedagogical support of these students in higher education institutions, including those of Uzbekistan.

Conceptual framework

Drawing on the acculturation theory of Berry [4], the culture-shock and U-curve traditions synthesized in models of student adaptation [5], the broader psychology of culture shock [6], and the stress-and-coping model of Lazarus and Folkman [7], the present framework reframes acculturation not as a problem to be solved but as a lived human process organized around four interacting dimensions (Figure 1).

The four dimensions are understood as follows:

- Emotional - the affective core of the journey: belonging and its absence, homesickness, grief for what was left behind, and hope for what may be built.
- Identity - the ongoing redefinition of the self across cultures, ranging from threatened or fragmented identity to integrated bicultural identity.
- Relational - the web of social ties, perceived support, and meaningful contact with host and co-national communities that buffers stress.
- Agentic - the student as an active author of their own transition, mobilizing coping strategies, resilience, and self-determination rather than passively enduring change.

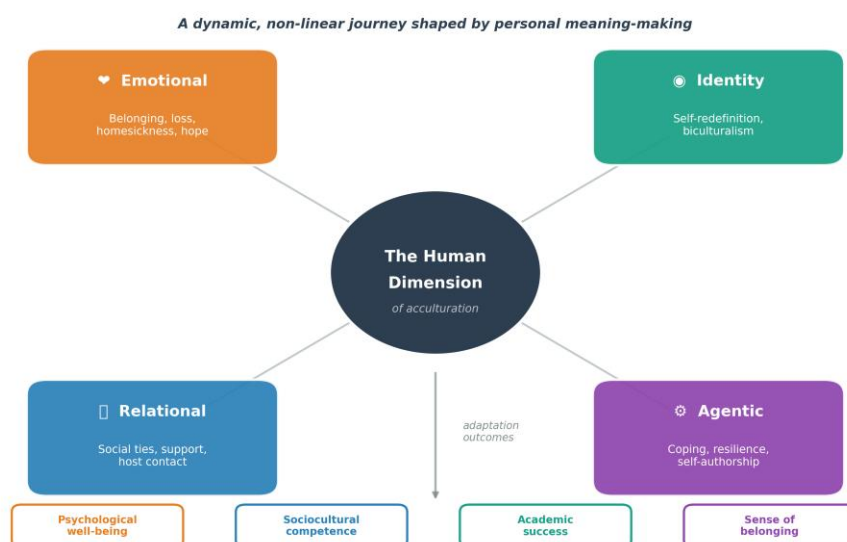


Figure 1. The human dimension of international student acculturation: four interacting dimensions feeding into adaptation outcomes.

Crucially, these dimensions interact and unfold over time in a non-linear way. A student may achieve sociocultural competence while still experiencing emotional strain, or may construct a strong bicultural identity precisely through agentic engagement with difficulty. The framework therefore treats the four dimensions as simultaneously present and mutually shaping, rather than as sequential stages.

Key considerations

Three considerations follow from foregrounding the human dimension. First, support should address the whole person, not only academic performance: emotional and identity needs are not peripheral but central to retention and well-being. Second, the most influential protective factors - language competence, social support, and personal resources such as resilience - are themselves deeply human and relational, and can be cultivated. Third, students are not merely recipients of intervention but agents of their own acculturation; the trajectories observed in international students show that effective support amplifies rather than replaces their agency [8].

Conclusion

Navigating the human dimension reframes international student acculturation as a meaningful, agentic, and relational journey rather than a deficit to be corrected. For higher education institutions, this implies support systems that integrate emotional, identity, relational, and agentic dimensions - through culturally responsive counselling, peer-mentoring, and belonging-oriented community building. For Uzbekistan's internationalizing universities, embedding this human-centred perspective offers a path to both stronger student well-being and improved retention. Future work should translate the framework into validated, context-sensitive support programmes and evaluate their impact on the lived experience of international students.

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