

The Experiential Pattern of Emotional Intelligence Displayed by International BBA Students

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Abstract. While recent reports reveal that the number of international students in Thailand has continuously increased over the past 7 years, the majority come from China and many have chosen to study the Bachelor of Business Administration program (BBA) provided by Burapha University. Studying overseas may entail difficulties for these students, experiencing new feelings arising from both an unfamiliar physical and learning environment, and a new culture. Emotional intelligence competencies (EQ-i) could be seen as essential skills for their adaptation. To investigate how the students might experience and exercise each emotional intelligence skill during their living and studying, a phenomenological qualitative research study was conducted with 10 students, 3 teachers and 2 staff. In this study, criterion sampling and the use of snowball techniques were employed to identify participants from Burapha University's International College and Faculty of Management and Tourism. The semi-structured interview was the main data collection technique employed to discover these adjustment issues. The data were transcribed and categorized into themes. The main findings of this study were that most Chinese students adapted to their new learning environment by exercising emotional intelligence skills, particularly intrapersonal skills, adaptability skills and problem-focused coping strategies.

Key words: International students, Chinese students, Emotional Intelligence, Experience pattern; Phenomenological study

Introduction

In Thailand, many universities have developed a number of international programs to satisfy the needs of international students. According to a report by the Commission on Higher Education (2008), the number of international students has increased from 5,601 in 2005 to 11,021 students in 2007. While this has created substantial economic benefits for the country, many students experience what is commonly termed "culture shock". CampusBlues (University of Cincinnati, 2008), highlighted the cultural difficulties experienced by international students, contrasting the exciting prospect of moving to a new country and experiencing a sometimes very different culture, with the need to cope with other difficult emotions, such as sadness, loneliness, fear and confusion. Pang and Barlas (1996) added that overseas students experienced difficulty understanding the people and with environmental adaptation, lead-

ing to homesickness, sometimes even leading to giving up and returning home without completing their studies. The problem regarding making new friends could also be seen when it was revealed by BBC News online (July, 3rd, 2003) that students might choose subjects unwisely, have difficulty adapting to older or younger classmates, consequently causing problems finding support networks. This might further lead to exam failures, so that students faced pressure both at the beginning and end of the academic year. It could be ascertained that most problems concerned the way students adapted and exercised their emotional intelligence skills. Because international students' learning performance was affected by their ability to cope with their emotions, possessing emotional intelligence skills facilitated students in addressing their emotions which would almost certainly have helped them to learn better. It would also facilitate their ability to cope with vastly different living arrangements and, other problems they encountered.

International students who understood and managed their emotions might gain assistance from teachers and friends and discipline themselves to learn well. In contrast, those who were unable to recognize or control their emotions might experience great difficulty concentrating on their studies, might not make many study friends and tended to be easily upset. Due to the importance of emotional intelligence in learning to cope with an unfamiliar learning environment, research into the emotional intelligence experiences of international BBA students needed to be conducted.

Definitions of emotional intelligence presented in the following paragraph, have, however, shown that most emotional intelligence definitions, components and concepts, which have been coined from a number of theoreticians, involve only slightly different terminology. For instance, while Mayer and Salovey (1997, p.10), viewed that "Emotional intelligence involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth". Weisinger (1998) maintained that Emotional Intelligence is the intelligent use of emotion to help guide an individual's behavior and thinking towards enhanced results. In addition, the five critical skills of Emotional Intelligence proposed by Goleman in 2007, takes account of: 1) knowing your emotions; 2) managing your emotions; 3) motivating yourself; 4) recognizing emotion in others; and 5) handling relationships. Adele (2005, p.7) records a related definition of emotional intelligence to the one mentioned by Goleman (1998) in that "Emotional intelligence is the ability to manage ourselves and our relationships with others so that we can live our intentions". Interestingly, Bar-On (2000) viewed emotional intelligence as an array of emotional and social knowledge and abilities that influence our overall ability to effectively cope with environmental demands and pressures. In 2006, he outlined the five areas of competencies which have been considered as non-cognitive intelligences. They include 1) intrapersonal skills comprising emotional self-awareness, assertiveness, self-regard, self-actualization, independence; 2) interpersonal skills consisting of interpersonal relationships, social responsibility, and empathy;

3) adaptability; 4) stress management; and 5) general mood.

It can be ascertained that scholars in this field have defined Emotional Intelligence by the specific competencies it encompasses. However, as this study intended to explore international students' experiences of emotional intelligence from their inner worlds which mainly addressed students' adaptability and their stress management abilities in the new environment, the five areas of emotional competencies proposed by Bar-on (2006) not only encompass a number of components proposed by other scholars but can also be considered most relevant to issues this study was addressing.

In this study the following simplified terms based on Bar-On's, (2006, p. 21) EQ-I Scales were adopted to explain the skills students might require in order to manage their experiences:

Intrapersonal skills: These skills involved students understanding and being in control of their own feelings and emotions. Also, their ability to manage their lives without relying on the support and assistance of others.

Interpersonal skills: These skills were related to how students understood the feelings and emotions of others, whether they be peers or persons in authority that they encountered. These skills would enable them to establish mutually satisfying relationships with others leading to a cooperative environment to assist in their living and study.

Stress Management skills: These skills enabled students to cope with their cope with stressful situations in an effective and constructive way.

Adaptability skills: These skills used by students concerned how they dealt with change, how they managed their emotions in difficult circumstances and the way in which they overcame problems.

General Mood skills: The general mood of students was influenced by how they focused on positive feelings rather than negative feelings and how they maintained a happy approach to their living and study.

According to the Office of the Registrar, Burapha University (2009 Unpublished), together with statistics revealed by the Commission on Higher Education in 2007, Chinese students were the majority of international students coming to Thailand. The course selected by most international students was Bachelor of Business Admin-

istration (BBA). At Burapha University, only the International College and the Faculty of Management and Tourism offer the BBA to international students. It was, therefore, considered appropriate to study the experience pattern of emotional intelligence displayed by BBA Chinese international students in both schools.

Research Questions

A total of six major research questions, with some supplementary related questions, were addressed in this study as follows:

- 1) What does the word "international students" mean to the students themselves and to their teachers and faculty members?
 - a. How would students generally describe their experiences of being an international student?
 - b. What are the international students' goals and expectations of coming to Burapha University, Thailand?
- 2) How do faculty members identify what are international students' expectations of coming to study abroad especially in Burapha university?
- 3) What do international students experience when entering into the new study environment at Burapha University?
 - a. Differentiate between happy and unpleasant experiences
 - b. What were their feelings about them,
 - c. When did they occur,
 - d. How often did they occur?
- 4) How do those experiences impact on their living and learning both at the arrival stage and presently?
- 5) Have they found a way of coping with their emotional experiences?
- 6) How have students exercised each of the emotional intelligence skills to help them to live and study in the university?

Research Design & Strategy

The research philosophy and paradigm of this study identified that a phenomenological, qualitative study was the most suitable approach and strategy for this study. Bogdan and Taylor (1975, pp. 4-5), for example, described a qualitative approach relating to a similar context to this study claiming that

Qualitative methods allow us to know people personally and to see them as they are developing their own definitions of the world. We experience what they experience in their daily struggles with their society. We learn about groups and experiences about which we may know nothing... qualitative methods enable us to explore concepts whose essence is lost in other research approaches. Such concepts as beauty, pain, faith, suffering, frustration, hope, and love can be studied as they are defined and experienced by real people everyday.

The reality/knowledge claims in this study are what students have developed over time. Students' experiences, emotional intelligence competencies and the strategies they applied to deal with particular emotions have grown from their past social learning, guiding their thoughts when reacting to different situations. In other words, they were based on subjective meanings of perceptions of how students viewed situations and used their own developed emotional competence to guide their response to their new learning environments. To further ensure that qualitative study was the approach to be used in this study, questions emphasizing Teleology proposed by Maykut and Morehouse (1994) were considered. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p. 4), "questions regarding Teleology emphasize the purpose of study and whether it aims to understand or test?" Confirming that, since this study aimed to understand what experiential patterns of emotional intelligence, international students experienced living and studying in a completely new environment, the findings would allow universities to better know students' needs, helping them adapt and achieve their study expectations. The study is not intended to prove any hypotheses or theories.

Instrument, Sampling and Data Collection

The data collection technique used in this study was in-depth interview using a Semi-structured interview schedule. All participants were interviewed for no more than two hours. To gain a strong content validity, the interview schedule was developed and edited before being approved by a professor of Education and a professor of Sociology. A pilot test to measure the reliability of the interview schedule was then carried out leading to

additional improvements.

By using criteria together with snowball sampling techniques, two groups of Chinese students were identified as the main participants in this study. The first group included four Chinese international students studying the Tourism Management major in Faculty of Management and Tourism. In the second group, the participants were six second to fourth year students studying in International College. They were studying courses in Tourism and Hotel Management, Marketing, Management and Logistics Management. To obtain data, this study followed 7 steps of data collection processes proposed by Creswell (1998). They included 1) locating site/participants, 2) gaining access to and developing rapport with participants, 3) selecting 10 students, 3 teachers and 2 staff as participants by setting criteria and applying snowball techniques, 4) starting collecting data, 5) Audio taping and note taking during interview, 6) solving problems as they arose and 7) organizing and storing all information into a computer system for subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis

After data was collected, transcribed and stored into computer files. ATLAS.ti program was, initially used to categorize these transcriptions into themes that might answer all research questions. The emerging themes were, manually examined to then address each research question. This was done by using the method of analysis of phenomenological data called Modification of the STEVICK-COLAIZZI-KEEN model, as proposed by Moustakas (1994).

Rigor Criteria

The study's validity was enhanced by several techniques, including: 1) Researcher-as-a detective, 2) Extended field work, 3) Low-inference descriptors, 4) Data triangulation, 5) Theory triangulation, 6) Participant feedback, and 7) Reflexivity

Findings and Discussion

The following findings addressing each research question were presented to establish experience patterns of emotional intelligence displayed by Burapha University BBA Chinese international

students.

From the data elicited in response to the first research question, it was found that students recognized that international students were foreign students adapting themselves to a new environment. They expected and received assistance from Faculty members regarding communication and learning a new culture. While disciplining themselves to study hard, they also anticipated others would assist with their motivation. Similarly University staff defined international students as students visiting temporarily from other countries, needing to learn new languages, cultures and perhaps changing their thinking, to adapt to a different environment. Teachers, on the other hand, saw international students as foreign students, (in Burapha University most are Chinese), enrolled to study in a Thai university. Students' expectations of coming to Burapha University included: 1) studying in a comfortable learning environment; 2) being students of a reputable university; 3) achieving their personal academic goals; 4) greater job opportunities; 5) gaining international experiences and developing their interpersonal skills; and 6) developing skills in another language.

After analyzing the answer to the second research question, the findings demonstrated that teacher's understanding of students' expectations differed slightly, comprising: 1) studying in a nice international learning community provided by the university; 2) studying in a place which facilitated learning; 3) achieving their individual learning goals; 4) independence; and 5) successful career attainment upon graduating. In contrast, staff had slightly different viewpoints regarding student expectations, including: 1) assistance from teachers regarding learning difficulties caused by using a different language; 2) satisfying their parents; 3) a comfortable place to stay in the university; 4) learning goal achievement; and 5) success in getting jobs after graduating

The findings of the third and the fourth research questions focused on students describing their satisfying experiences about the university which impacted on both living and learning when entering the new study environment. The main experiences were: 1) studying in a beautiful and comfortable university; 2) feeling confident of successful learning by taking advantage of enhanced university learning facilities; and 3) finding new



good friends from other countries. Furthermore, regarding learning experiences, many students were pleased by: 1) impressive teaching techniques used by western teachers; and 2) studying in a relaxing classroom where snacks and drinks were allowed. Extra-learning activities concerned students being pleased by: 1) developing good relationships with many new friends from other countries during group assignment work; and 2) receiving learning help from their senior students and friends. Regarding living experiences, many students found comfort from: 1) living in the Chinese friendly community of Bangsae where people have always offered them kindness; 2) living in the relaxing beautiful area of a famous holiday destination; 3) freedom from being away from their parents; 4) living with many friends in comfortable environments; and 5) experiencing great local foods (for those able to adapt). Students were cheered by developing relationships with other people, including 1) the effort teachers made in ensuring students benefit not only regarding learning but also in adapting them to live well in the new environment; 2) meeting new sincere, good friends who help them both in learning and living. In contrast, unsatisfactory experiences have impacted on students' living and studying, including 1) living and studying together with too many Chinese students, initially impeded them from making new international friends. Many students, moreover, expressed their disappointment about some poor management systems within school comprising 1) inability to obtain important information from the university website; 2) missing internship opportunities; 3) strict control over the way they wear uniforms; 4) no teacher consultation about their study plans. Students' uncomfortable experiences in the classroom included 1) length of classes; 2) annoyance about friends chatting in classes; 3) foreign language study materials; 4) insufficient handouts; 5) dictionaries not allowed in exams; 6) essay tests when multiple choice exams were preferred. Some unfulfilling experiences consisted of 1) not being trusted by local friends excluding them from group assignments; 2) difficulty balancing study and daily living. Students had difficulties living, regarding 1) communicating with some local people; 2) no confidence in University Hospital doctors; 3) not understanding some Thai cultures such as the way to treat elders. In addition many

male students have complained about their poor-living conditions in university dormitories. Some students initially experienced difficulties, such as 1) not enjoying the taste of local food; 2) not knowing where to find delicious food; 3) not knowing how to order food. Finally, many students experienced difficulty living in too warm climate.

Regarding the fifth research question, it was found that students presented at least five different strategies for coping with their emotional experiences. They were 1) staying alone and doing relaxing activities; 2) sharing both good and unhappy experiences with others; 3) playing sport; 4) engaging in social activities with friends; 5) thinking positively

In answering the final research question, it was found that many students exercised their intrapersonal skills including recognizing unhealthy feelings and controlling them before they developed into disruptive emotions, to ensure comfortable living. Diplomatically articulating their needs to their friends allowed them to live their lives in their own way. Considering their future goals enabled purposeful living. In interpersonal skills, recognizing other people's feelings assisted their getting along with others. Respecting others feelings promoted a happy society among staff, teachers and students where everyone helped each other. Students' stress management skills allowed them to live under pressure, stay calm and think about possible solutions to cope with many situations; as a result many students continued living normally. Many students learned to adapt well, practicing adaptability skills, to comfortably settle into the new environment, faster. They were proud of themselves, becoming smarter in dealing with people and problems and practicing problem solving skills. Being optimistic and happy students, exercising general mood skills, enabled them to feel less sad or worried and concentrating instead on becoming successful in the future. While they were studying, it was found that intrapersonal skills helped many students to eliminate emotions that impeded their concentration. Also rather than wasting time going out, the ability to refuse certain invitations from friends, by practicing self-independence skills, allowed many students to focus on studying. In addition, self actualization skills encouraged students to set their learning goals, establishing strategic ways to stay motivated and achieve them. By recognizing

teachers' feelings and their emphasis on certain lessons, students used their interpersonal skills, to understand lessons better and forecast exam questions. Also students felt studying hard would impress teachers and might also benefit students' grading results. Ability to manage good relationships with friends helped students learn better by group-studying. Impulse control skills helped students to do their best in the next exam as opposed to focusing on their previous poor one.

Implications for Practice

Based on the research findings from this study, some implications were proposed to three groups of people having roles in looking after Chinese international students, comprising

1) Chinese students' advisors in school, 2) classroom teachers, 3) educational providers.

Implication for practice # 1: For students' advisor in school. According to discussion presented earlier in this article, Chinese international students' emotional experiences could possibly be influenced by what they expected from coming to study at Burapha University and what they experienced in reality. It was recommended that schools and teachers should ascertain what students expected from their studying and living. While some expectations regarding studying and living were presented as standard guidelines in this study, new expectations could possibly be added by new groups of students. To ensure that all students are going to spend their time purposefully, when they first arrive, schools/teachers should help students to articulate what their life goals, learning goals, and career goals were. Once their goals were established, teachers should help students to set a strategic plan to achieve their goals ensuring that students could practice particular useful skills, such as time management which has been recognized as important in balancing their living and studying. In addition, as many students' unsatisfactory experiences, both in studying and living, was derived from their language difficulty, including: 1) feeling less benefit by living and studying with their friends from China; 2) not knowing how to order food, nor knowing what the food will be like, where to eat good food; and 3) not being able to communicate well with local people when buy-

ing things, going out, or settling into their new environment. These recognized problems could be greatly minimized if the university were to take active steps to integrate them better, as well as allocating them a teacher as their advisor and/or they 'buddy' each student up with a local student.

Implication for practice # 2: For the classroom teachers. As students reported enjoying studying in classrooms here because they could learn something that would be of benefit to their future career, teachers might motivate them better by linking how important, what they are learning is, to their future careers. To promote an inclusive classroom for all students, teachers should always understand students' diversities when teaching. A puzzled look on students' faces should be responded to with further explanation. All students should be noticed and recognized by name in class. Also, from the outset, class rules needed to be specified clearly to ensure that all students respected each other and were aware of disturbing other students' learning during studying. Giving students regular breaks could also help students to relax, do their individual business (e.g., going to toilet, or smoking) before returning to class refreshed enough to concentrate on their study again. Additionally, the problem of students' not responding in class when they were asked to participate might be solved by encouraging students to read information in advance and being ready to answer questions on the homework. Moreover, a teacher reported assisting the Chinese students by emailing them PowerPoint presentations in advance of classes. Also, since students have reported enjoying studying in groups, teachers might consider this as a way to encourage students to share their opinions with friends before asking them to present their groups' ideas to the class. Students should also become familiar with the correct language to use in asking or sharing opinions with the class, which is a further benefit when they enter the workplace. Also, encouraging an opened-minded, friendly classroom where all students respect other people's opinions was of importance in a tolerant university community of learners. Teachers should notice and understand students' language difficulties, so that in examination rooms, some support could be given at a certain level. E.G., dictionaries (checked to ensure no written notes have been added) should be allowed



to be taken with them into examination rooms.

Implication for practice # 3: For Educational providers. Since one of many students' unsatisfactory experiences concerned poor living conditions in male dormitories-- buildings and rooms are old, small and dirty -- which might discourage students' learning in their rooms; this matter should be investigated urgently. If this was the case, improvement needed to be put in place to ensure that dormitories became a good learning environment for all students. Moreover, while the use of student information systems in Burapha schools has been promoted, encouraging students to take responsibility in addressing certain processes, schools need to ensure that the systems have been monitored and important information for students regularly brought up-to-date. Also, to encourage students to follow the dress codes according to university' policies, schools should promote the link between how students could benefit from dressing properly to be part of their professional look when going to work in their future business careers. Finally, in the university, apart from allocating students' an advisor, a free counseling unit, operated by a team of qualified psychologists, should be set up and promoted to both local and international students, so that when students encounter problems or need some emotional support they know where to go to get help. Moreover, the university hospital should also be introduced and promoted to all students, in order that they knew that they might go there confidently to get health services, when they were sick.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study has suggested some further research topics, which could be undertaken, based on deficiencies found in the literature review and findings emerging from the study.

First, the coping techniques for dealing with emotional experiences related to each component of emotional intelligence (EI), that were found in this study, could be investigated in a quantitative study. A longitudinal study of a group of overseas students throughout their degree could: 1) explore how many international students have practiced these useful EI techniques to benefit their living and studying; 2) ensure students' enjoy living and learning; and 3) recognize potential problems

caused by lacking certain EI skills and examine ways to overcome them.

Second, as time-management has been found to be one of the most crucial skills required by international students, according to Nelson and Nelson (2003), and in this study, it would be useful to study the adaptability experiences practiced by students able to effectively achieve their learning goals, determining how they balanced their studies and lives in Thailand. This research could help staff give evidence-based advice to future students on developing such useful skills.

Third, there should be studies exploring how faculty members might help international students develop skills related to each of the emotional components based on this study. E.G. how teachers could help students develop positive thinking skills to consider when encountering problems or what problem solving skills, based on experiences students revealed in this study, teachers might provide them with, to help them overcome certain problems as they occur.

Fourth, unsuccessful international students terminating their study early should be interviewed as potential case studies to explore their experiences studying and living in Thailand. This could explore particular issues and problems raised in this study and lead to prevention or elimination of similar difficulties in the future. Fifth, this study found ways Chinese students helped their study by recognizing teachers' signals. An obvious opportunity for a new study might be investigating the signals and techniques students could perceive, this could be used by teachers regularly and routinely whenever they want important points recognized by students.

Sixth, while this study has revealed experiences related to emotional intelligence displayed by Chinese international students, it would also be interesting to examine what experiences relating to emotional intelligence international students coming from other countries have used to ensure their success in studying and living in Thailand. It is likely that students coming from other countries might adopt some different, but nevertheless useful, strategies that could benefit all international students. Seventh, a potential study could also be a longitudinal study examining the contrast between students who have used particular techniques well, with others who have adopted such skills, poorly.



Eighth, while language difficulties have been claimed by many Chinese students in this study as a problem in studying and living in Thailand, this does not happen to all students. It might therefore, be useful if a new study investigated how certain Chinese students, have managed to adapt well in both learning and living.

Summary and Conclusions

This study has made an original contribution to the research literature regarding the emotional intelligence skills required by BBA Chinese international students by finding that: 1) Recognizing the need for self-motivation to study, expecting encouragement by others, and anticipating assistance from staff for both learning and living were adaptative techniques used to overcome international students' perceived communication difficulties; 2) Being instilled by parents with the importance of studying and a strong Chinese competitive culture, some students adapted themselves well to their new learning environment. Also, becoming overseas students required both strong self-actualization skills and external motivation, such as scholarships, to focus on their learning goals or obtaining enough theoretical and practical knowledge to benefit their future careers; 3) Though some Chinese students expected to develop good relationships (i.e., interpersonal skills) with others by attending non-classroom school activities, their self-actualization could sometimes be impeded and feelings hurt if local students did not trust them enough to share many school jobs or group assignments with them; 4) Students' problems could be prevented earlier or solved more quickly, fulfilling students' needs, if their expectations were known by faculty members. Many students, for example, expressed their satisfaction, citing learning useful lessons for future career and better understanding than in China, because the classes at Burapha University were more relaxed and practiced student-centered teaching techniques where ideas could be shared, also providing good international learning communities which enabled them to meet new friends from both China and other countries. While this experience also helped them to develop interpersonal skills, adaptability, problem solving and goal achievement, some students, however, reported feeling lost if there were no other Chinese students

in the class. This affected their confidence and they reported feeling out of their depth; 5) Though many Chinese students felt more secure when in the company of their Chinese friends initially, many also recognized the need for developing new cross-cultural relationships with new friends; 6) Some students displayed independence, managed their emotions well and were happy to solve problems by themselves, while others needed outside support from teachers, staff, friends and family. Some just needed somebody to listen. Social chats helped many gain emotional support from same-gender friends; others already had the optimism often associated with Chinese proverbs; 7) Students who were able to cope well possessed good interpersonal skills, including self-awareness, assertiveness, independence, and self-actualization. They were able to recognize both their own emotions and those of others and to eliminate bad feelings. They could act in a diplomatic way with others to avoid difficulties, speak their minds and do their own thing without upsetting anyone. They lived purposefully by developing long-term and short-term plans for their future and for achieving their goals; they felt satisfied with their lives, whilst knowing when and to whom to turn for help and maintained good relationships with everyone; they were also able to recognize when compromise was called for, be caring, forgiving and tolerant when necessary; stress management skills allowed them to manage stress well, both within themselves and in others. Students' adaptability skills included reality-tests, flexibility, and solving problems, allowing them to enjoy new life experiences, rather than being homesick. Additionally, general mood skills, such as being happy and optimistic, kept students in a good frame of mind, free of worry, whilst being happy and satisfied most of the time; 8) In studying, intrapersonal skills, such as being aware of bodily changes and behaviors, allowed students to notice these emotions early and eliminate them, enabling them to learn, understand and focus on lessons effectively; 9) Some students displayed understanding and keenness to learn more, and developed healthy relationships with teachers. They were popular both with teachers and fellow students who welcomed their help or being part of group study; 10) Recognizing signals given by teachers about important information helped some Chinese students study more efficiently prior to

exams and, if they were able to be optimistic, could concentrate on future exams, as opposed to worrying about earlier poor performance.

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