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## Global Learners – Local Adjustments: Examining the Impact of Culture and Education Backgrounds on Academic Readiness, Adaptation and Success of a Cohort of Chinese MBA Students

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# **GLOBAL LEARNERS – LOCAL ADJUSTMENTS: EXAMINING THE IMPACT OF CULTURE AND EDUCATION BACKGROUNDS ON ACADEMIC READINESS, ADAPTATION AND SUCCESS OF A COHORT OF CHINESE MBA STUDENTS**

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**ABSTRACT:** Adult global learners (AGLs), particularly those with lack of knowledge or understanding of American culture, often have a difficult time adjusting to academic life in the US. We report on a study conducted to determine impacts of focused interventions to facilitate adaptation and resilience of a cohort of 28 Chinese MBA AGLs at Winthrop University, a Master's Comprehensive Public University in the Southeastern region of the US. The AGLs were middle and senior managers from the city of Liuzhou, China. Targeted interventions were made to help the Liuzhou AGLs adapt to the rigors, challenge and demands both academically and socially of completing their degree at the University. Preliminary results show that a few key factors influence the academic performance, cultural adaptation, and educational experience of the Liuzhou AGLs. Moreover, the data shows the Liuzhou AGLs have benefited from the tailored intervention program that was implemented by the University to help them gain the most out of their time studying in the US.

**Keywords:** international graduate students, adult global learners, English language and culture, academic preparation, readiness for campus life in the US

## **Introduction**

The continued dominance of English as *lingua franca* of international trade and global commerce has led to higher demand for and interest in a USA-branded college degree, both at the undergraduate and graduate levels (Leong, 2015; Mamiseishvili, 2012; Montgomery & Arensdorf, 2012). According to the Institute of International Education (2017), more than one million international students attended U.S. colleges and universities during the academic year of 2016-17. This figure constitutes a 7 percent increase from the previous year's number of international students in the US (IIE, 2017).

The increasing number of international students in the US offers tremendous opportunities and benefits (Coryelle, Durodoye, Wright, & Nguyen, 2012). However, due to differences in academic, cultural, and social backgrounds of various countries around the world, international students present new and often interesting sets of challenges to their US home institutions (Dennehy, 2015; Meyer, 2014). According to Hofstede (1991),

activities, actions and even mental attitudes are significantly shaped by one's culture. As a result, US higher education institutions must take concrete steps and measures at all levels of the academic enterprise to facilitate the adaptation and integration of their international students on their campuses (Coryell et al., 2012). This often means realigning, altering, or redefining internal processes and services to ensure the readiness, adaptation, and success of their international students.

However, many US colleges and universities often respond to the greater presence of international students on their campus with programs and initiatives that are isolated and disjointed (Bartram, 2008; Lee, 2010) At present, key activities involve orientation events upon the arrival of the international students on campus, followed by mid-semester interventions to help with academic difficulties, and informal linkages with local faith-based organizations for English tutoring and multi-cultural interactions (Birnbaum, Cardona, Milian, & Gonzalez, 2012). While those acculturation activities are helpful, much work remains to be done at many colleges and universities in the US to reach the goal of helping international students integrate, adapt, and succeed on their campuses (Coryell et al., 2012).

## **Literature Review**

### **Global Learners**

With our current interdependent and interlinked global economy, there is at present a greater need for professionals with strong technical expertise and advanced intercultural competencies (American Council of Education, 2013). As a result, students from all over the world come to the US or other English-speaking countries to acquire the necessary credentials that will allow them to land a coveted job at a multi-national corporation, an organization with a strong international presence, or a local entity with international aspirations (Hunter, White, & Godbey, 2006; Tarrant, 2010).

However, international students who are enrolled at US higher education institutions (HIEs) must deal with numerous challenges and barriers which include: English language knowledge, academic readiness, and acculturation to the norms of their new "home" institutions (Fass-Holmes & Vaughn, 2014; Glass & Westmont 2014; Kashima, & Loh, 2006). Fortunately, given the increased availability and use of the Internet and social media, there is now broader awareness of multi-cultural issues by high school students across the globe (Kabilan, Ahmad & Abidin, 2010; Kaplan & Haenline, 2010). As a result, many international undergraduate students are now having a much easier time making the transition to collegiate life in the US than in years past (Forbush & Foucault-Welles, 2015).

### **Adult Global Learners**

In this paper, we define international graduate students as "Adult Global Learners" (AGL) given that they have significant years of training and work experience in their home countries (Chan, 2010; Hovland, 2009). We also accept that adult international students tend to have a more difficult time with academic and socio-cultural life at their

schools than their undergraduate counterparts while completing their degree programs in the US (Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007; Vaughn, Bergman & Fass-Holmes, 2015).

According to the Council of Graduate Schools (2009), the average age of a US graduate student is 28. These students often have other responsibilities such as work, parenting, civic duties or personal activities outside their academic pursuits (Markle, 2015). Therefore, AGLs, and most specifically those who come to the US to complete professional-oriented programs of study, require more learner-centered instructional approaches and interventions that are based on andragogical methods and principles (Knowles, 1989; Muduli & Raval, 2018). Moreover, AGLs face the challenge of socio-cultural adaptation and integration to their schools in the US, given that they will have a much stronger connection to their home cultures.

Furthermore, international students who come to the US to pursue a professionally-oriented program of study such as MBA, Law, Nursing, Public Administration, Teacher Education, or Social Work will have different attitudes and stronger ties and connections to their professions (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lee, 2010; Markle, 2015). In addition, due to their unique socio-cultural profiles and previous academic backgrounds, international graduate students will tend to have more defined motivational orientations with regard to their academic pursuits in the US (Lin & Wang, 2015).

### **Local Demand**

The ability to successfully make a campus more prepared, ready, and welcoming to international students and AGLs very often depends on the institution's internal cultures, overall mission, strategic focus, and steadfast commitment to global education and diversity programs (Agnew & VanBalkom, 2009; Cook, 2016; Deardorff, 2006). This is because there are many different elements that factor into creating a learning environment that addresses the unique needs of students who are both older and have different cultural backgrounds. These include recruiting and hosting international students, faculty and student engagement, and adult-oriented pedagogy and curriculum adjustments (Burnett & Huisman, 2010; Qiang, 2003).

The senior leadership of colleges and universities clearly have the responsibility to lead personnel, allocate the necessary resources, and formulate policies for the efficient and effective functioning of their institutions (Ota, 2013; Sporn, 1996). Therefore, they play a critical role in making the campus more accessible and accommodating to international students. Nevertheless, it is faculty members along with academic support personnel who ultimately have the greatest impact on the adaptation, integration, and success of international students at most universities (Leong, 2015; Lin & Wang, 2015; Mamiseishvili, 2012). As international students and most specifically AGLs would have been more accustomed to the instructional approaches and methods of their home countries, faculty members take on the responsibility of adjusting their teaching, assessment, and even communication methods to create a learning environment that will allow all students to excel (Hartshorne & Baucom, 2007).

### **Campus Internationalization**

Large state and research universities have the depth and breadth of resources to pursue comprehensive and campus-wide strategies that touch all major programming units of the institution to support their international students (Coryell et al., 2012). These institutions, which are typically located in urban environments, have large (over 20,000 students) and very diverse student populations including over 15% of international students (Fass-Holmes, 2016). As a result, they have the requisite breadth, depth, and stature in academic programming, faculty expertise, students' interest, and national influence to commit significant time and resources to make campus internationalization a key part of their overall mission.

In contrast, public regional master's comprehensive colleges and universities are for the most part located in smaller towns and often lack of resources, tradition, or experience in global and multi-cultural academic training (Coryell et al., 2012). The enrollment levels of those institutions often do not exceed 10,000 students with a percentage of international students at or below 5% of their total student population. Master's comprehensive institutions are especially challenged with integrating international students at their campuses. These institutions nonetheless must develop innovative academic intervention approaches and student support efforts that address the unique situations and the prevailing needs of their international students.

### **The Liuzhou Program at Winthrop University**

Winthrop University entered into a contract with the Liuzhou People's Municipal Government (Liuzhou) in the People's Republic of China in June 2016. Liuzhou is a city that is located in Guanxi, an autonomous region located in southern China (Kuo & Falkenheim, 2014). According to the contract, prospective students for the program would be middle and senior managers in the Liuzhou government and its related institutions. The priority industries for eligible applicants for the Liuzhou program are manufacturing, parks and recreation, government operations, government services, tourism affairs, and police services. In addition, eligible applicants must have many years of work experience in business functional areas such as human resources, finance, operations, training and customer service before going through a rigorous internal selection process within Liuzhou. Successful applicants in the Liuzhou internal selection process would then be able to apply to the Winthrop MBA program.

### College-Level Interventions

In keeping with the internationalization aspirations of the University, comprehensive, tailored, and dedicated support is being provided to the Liuzhou MBA students. In addition to Winthrop's general orientation and welcome to campus activities, tailored interventions are offered to the Liuzhou students to ensure their seamless adaptation, degree progression, and eventual successful graduation from the MBA program at the University. Moreover, the University made additional personnel available to ensure that students felt fully integrated to life academically, culturally, and socially at the University.

Academic-related efforts to assist the Liuzhou students are coordinated through the MBA program Director, who is also a senior faculty member in the College of Business of the

University. The Director has many years of experience working with students from Nantung, China through a separate international exchange program. The Director made sure that other faculty in the College of Business who have primary teaching responsibilities for the Liuzhou students had previous international academic experience as instructors or researchers.

For day to day academic help, a GA is assigned to serve as a tutor for the Liuzhou students. The Liuzhou GA is required to be a second year MBA student who has already completed most of the required courses of the program. Moreover, the GA must have good familiarity with the different academic support units of the University to which the students could be referred in case of need. While the Liuzhou students have access to a translator, the Director required that the students communicate in English while on University campus. Moreover, steps were taken to ensure that the Liuzhou students were teamed with American and non-Chinese peers in group work activities in classroom and for collaborative-oriented homework and similar assignments.

### University-Level Intervention and Support

English language and cross-cultural support are provided to the Liuzhou students at various times during the program to help them better integrate at the University. For example, students identified as having weaker conversational English skills are linked with the International Center (IC) at the University for one-on-one support. Also, the Liuzhou GA has the responsibility to take the students to personal and social activities, such as local fairs, cultural events, and local stores.

Further, the IC at the University takes the lead in arranging advising sessions with appropriate University faculty and staff to help the students prepare for their second semester in the MBA program. The center is responsible for completing all required visa paperwork and governmental notifications for the Liuzhou students. The IC leads efforts to connect the Liuzhou students with all applicable socio-cultural events taking place at the University that could enhance their adaptation, integration, and involvement at the school. These included international fairs, symposia on cultural issues and key programming activities focused on US or state of Carolina history, culture, or holidays.

As a result, from arrival through graduation, the Liuzhou students are connected with multiple personnel and units of the University. The goal is to ensure that the students feel “at home” as much as possible while completing their degree program at the University.

## **Methodology**

### **Purpose**

The Liuzhou study sought to determine and evaluate the most salient learning factors and educational experiences that affect the readiness, adaptation, and degree completion success of a selected group of international students at Winthrop University. In addition, the researchers wanted to gauge how culture affect the students’ perception of academic interventions and efforts undertaken at the University to help them integrate and adapt to campus life at the University.

## **Research Questions**

The Liuzhou research study was guided by the following two research questions:

1. In what ways do the students' degree of connection to their home culture influence their perception of readiness, adaptation, and success for study in the US?
2. To what degree do the students' educational background as AGLs impact the time they spent on academic-related activities while in the US?

## **Survey Instrument**

A survey instrument was developed specifically for the Liuzhou study. This was done for three reasons. First, the researchers did not find an existing survey instrument that addressed the issues being examined through the study. Second, the researchers wanted to be sure the survey questions were relatively free of cultural biases. Third, there was a need to ensure that language used in the survey was appropriate for the level of English skills of the participants in the study.

## **Relevant Themes and Learning Factors for the Study**

Preliminary learning factors affecting readiness, adaptation, and success were captured through focus group interviews with faculty, staff, and international students at the University. These factors were then shared with a select group of external faculty members, scholars and practitioners who are directly involved in teaching or supporting international students in the US, for input and feedback. The list of learning factors was revised based on the input of the external reviewers.

Some learning factors were deleted, and a few others were updated based on the input of the external reviewers. After some preliminary testing, an updated version of the survey, which included relevant learning factors for the study, was given to the first cohort of the Liuzhou students. These students started their program of study at the University in fall 2016. Based on the inputs and feedback of the first cohort of Liuzhou students, the researchers were able to modify and adjust the language that was ultimately used in the final version of the survey.

## **Participants**

Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants for the Liuzhou study, which consisted of the entire second cohort of 28 Liuzhou students in the fall 2017 MBA program at Winthrop University. Responses were received and tabulated for two offerings of the survey. The first offering of the survey was conducted during the first week of the students' arrival at the University in early August 2017. The second offering of the survey was conducted again in May 2018, after the students had completed two semesters of course work at the University.

## **Data Collection**

The survey instrument for the study consisted of 45 questions broken down in three sections: demographics, perception, and comments. The demographics section comprised

of 10 questions addressing the participants' background. Participants were also asked about their study habits and practices in the follow-up version of the survey. The perception section consisted of Likert-scale questions on learning factors affecting readiness, adaptation, and success. Participants were provided choices ranging from 1 (Extremely Important) to 5 (Not at All Important) for each perception factor. The comment section included both multiple-choice and open-ended questions.

### Age and Learning Factor Clustering

As shown in Table 1, we developed two clusters from the responses provided by the participants. These are: *Age* and *Learning Factor*. The use of the clusters was intended to allow a sharper examination of how culture (measured by student's age) and learning factor (measured by the student's Likert-scale selection) impact the students' academic Readiness, Adaptation and Success.

Table 1  
*Clustering of the AGL Data*

Category	Cluster	Definition
Age	Established	Greater than 30 years
	Connected	30 years or less
Education	Team-Leaning	Undergraduate Degree in Arts and Science related field
Background	Individual-Leaning	Undergraduate Degree in Engineering & Commerce related field
Learning Strategy, Activity, or Aid	Enhancing	Ranked 1 or 2
	Contributing	Ranked 3 or greater
<i>Scale: 1 = Extremely Important, 2: Important, 3: Neutral, 4: Somewhat Important; 5: Not Important</i>		

### Data Analysis

Data analysis for the study was completed using MS-Excel, while Minitab was used to perform statistical analyses on continuous variables. A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to determine the difference between Established and Connected groups. Answers to open-ended questions were edited for grammatical clarity and then categorized into relevant groups related to the learning factors of focus for the study.

### Results and Discussions

Descriptive statistics about the Liuzhou students are presented in this section of the paper. These are followed by inferential statistics on the survey responses that were provided by the Liuzhou students.

Table 2  
*Descriptive Data for the Liuzhou Pilot Study*

Data Item	Mean	Standard Dev.	95% CI Around the Mean	
			Lower	Upper
<b>Overall <sup>a</sup></b>				
Age	30.89	4.10	29.30	32.48
YSE (At Entry)	4.60	2.02	3.82	5.39
LOK - US *	2.64	0.83	2.32	2.96
Extra Work Time**	7.04	2.22	6.17	7.89
<b>Established <sup>b</sup></b>				
Age	34.14	2.54	32.68	35.61

YSE (At Entry)	4.78	2.01	3.63	5.94
LOK - US *	2.50	0.76	2.06	2.93
Extra Work Time**	7.10	2.37	5.70	8.44
<b>Connected <sup>c</sup></b>				
Age	27.64	2.41	26.25	29.03
YSE (At Entry)	4.43	2.10	3.22	5.64
LOK - US *	2.79	0.89	2.27	3.30
Extra Work Time**	7.00	2.14	5.76	8.24

Cluster: Overall = 28; Established = 14; Connected = 14\*LOK-US (Level of Knowledge of US Culture) Scale: 5 (Very High) to 1 (Low); \*\*Extra Work Time Value: Hours

Table 2 lists the average age, years of studying English (YSE), time (in hours) spent doing extra academic work and level of knowledge of US culture (LOK-US) for the entire Liuzhou cohort of students. Those same statistics are also listed for the *Established* and *Connected* groups. Overall, there were 9 males (32%) and 19 females (68%) in the study. The number of *Established* and *Connected* participants were the same at 14.

Table 3

*Critical Factors Determined by AGLs for Readiness, Adaptation and Success*

Dimension	Overall	Established	Connected
<b>Readiness</b>	Academic Reading	Academic Reading	English Proficiency
		English Proficiency	Academic Reading
		Academic Writing	Academic Writing
<b>Adaptation</b>	Proper Use of Ref & Copyrighted Materials	Critical Thinking	Following Student Code of Conduct
		Proper Use of Copyrighted Materials	Utilizing available academic Resources
		Plagiarism	Importance of Grade Point Average
<b>Success</b>	The Importance of Assignments	The Importance of Assignments	Understanding of Learning Strategies
		Asking Questions During Class	Contacting Professors Outside of Class
		Contacting Professors Outside of Class	The Importance of Assignments

Table #3 above presents responses for the learning strategy, activity, or aid deemed to be *Enhancing* or *Contributing* to the academic readiness, adaptation and success of the *Established* and *Connected* AGL groups that were developed for the study. The answers provided by the students were rank-ordered. The top three learning activities and behaviors are listed in Table 3. Thus, international graduate students and particularly those from China who wish to come to the US to pursue a professionally-oriented program of study should pay close attention to these learning factors and develop appropriate strategies to overcome any gaps or barriers that stand in the way of achieving their educational goals.

Table 4  
*Academic Background and Study Habit*

<b>Academic Background</b>	<b>Count</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>Standard Dev.</b>
Team-Leaning Learners	11	6.53	7	2.53
Individual-Leaning Learners	17	7.82	8	1.4

To determine the impact of training background and readiness, the Liuzhou participants were broken down into two groups. As presented in Table #4, the first group, *Team-Leaning* learners (n = 11) comprised of students who had completed their degrees in an Arts and Science related field. The second group which was termed *Individual-Leaning* learners (n = 17), included students with degrees in fields related to Engineering & Commerce. Table 4 presents the means and median scores of extra hours (beyond what is expected of traditional students) that were spent by each group of learners on homework and other course related activities.

### Findings

The Liuzhou study sought to gauge the most salient learning factors related to the readiness, adaptation, and degree progression success of a group of Chinese student who are pursuing graduate degrees in the US. We defined those students as Adult Global Learners (AGL) as they spent significant years of training and working in China prior to coming to the US. The study also aimed to understand the views and perspectives of the AGLs on critical learning factors for academic success in the US.

*Q1: In what ways do the students' degree of connection to their home culture influence their perception of readiness, adaptation, and success for study in the US?*

To answer this question, we divided the students into two age groups for analysis. The groups were *Established* for those over 30 years of age and *Connected* for those under 30. As presented in Table 3, both groups found Academic Reading, Proper Use of Copyrighted Materials and Importance of Assignments as critical learning and behavior factors for the dimensions of Readiness, Adaptation, and Success. In the Readiness dimension, both groups selected similar top three learning factors, although in different rank order. There are some differences between the factors deemed critical by the two groups for the Adaptation and Success dimension. For example, the learning factor Contacting Professors Outside Class was ranked very high by the *Established* group. On the other hand, the *Connected* selected Asking Questions during Class as its highest learning factor for that same dimension.

Research and studies have shown that the length of time spent in a Confucian culture strengthens one's view and orientation towards people in a position of authority (Dennehy, 2015). As noted by Hofstede (1991) and Meyer (2014), in Confucian cultures e.g., China, Japan and South Korea, people in positions of higher authority should not be challenged publicly. The Liuzhou students may perceive that asking questions in class could be interpreted as challenging the professor's knowledge and expertise. Thus, the *Established* students who spent more time in the Confucian culture due to their age would

see Contacting Professors Outside Class as a more appropriate way to address someone in a higher position than them.

Question 2 asked: *To what degree do the students' educational background as AGLs impact the time they spent on academic-related activities while in the US?*

We looked at the number of extra study hours spent by students defined in the study as *Team-Oriented* (Arts and Science) and *Individual-Leaning* (Engineering and Commerce). Various statistical tests were conducted to determine whether educational background had an impact on their academic-related activities. None of these tests found significant difference even at alpha values above .3. However, differences were found with mean and median comparisons between the two groups. As shown in Table 4, the *Team-Oriented* group spent on average less time (-1.3 hour for the mean and -1 hour for the median) than the *Individual-Leaning*. Therefore, we can conclude that the academic background of the international graduate students investigated in the study, measured in terms of their first post-secondary degree, has some modest impact on their preparation and readiness for study in the US. This information should be useful for future cohorts of the Liuzhou program who have similar academic background and training as those in the study.

### **Limitations**

The Liuzhou study was conducted as a pilot effort. The participants for the study were all part of a single cohort of MBA students for Liuzhou City, China. Further, the sample size for the study was 28, a relatively small figure. Consequently, findings from the data analysis conducted as part of the study are not generalizable. As the partnership between Winthrop University and Liuzhou City spans multiple years, we anticipate broadening the research in a future study. We also aim to include more participants from Asia and other countries such as India that have similar cultural backgrounds to gauge the impact of background, culture, and training on those learning factors that have been investigated in the pilot study delineated in this paper.

### **Conclusion**

The Liuzhou students came to the US after earning their undergraduate degrees and working for many years at government institutions in China. As a result, they had to quickly adjust to an entirely new learning environment that presented unfamiliar instruction, mentoring, assessment, and academic intervention methods and approaches. As presented in this paper, targeted and focused interventions can help international students like those from Liuzhou City negotiate differences in discourses, norms, and teacher-student interactions that they are faced with in their new educational and classroom environments in the US. Together with campus internationalization efforts, these interventions will go a long way toward supporting the needs and aspirations of global learners who come to the US to obtain the skills necessary to assume greater responsibilities at their places of employment back in their home countries.

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