

## ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY IRANIAN STUDENTS IN FINLAND: A PHENOMENOGRAPHIC STUDY

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine the experience of international students studying in Finland based on a phenomenographical approach. Due to the nationality of the researcher Iranian students were selected as the research sample and 25 tertiary-level students from various Finnish universities were interviewed through semi-structured interviews. The collected data were assessed and interpreted based on the theory of Anxiety-Uncertainty Management (AUM). The results showed that the Finnish academic system, such as teaching/ learning strategies, assessment methods, and university facilities, reduces participants' anxiety/uncertainty. The participants noted fundamental differences between characteristics and teaching style of Finnish and Iranian teachers in universities. However, this unexpected situation not only did not make them anxious, but also made them feel more comfortable than when they were studying in Iranian universities. In contrast, Finnish culture, and communication issue associated with language barriers and lack of job opportunities increase participants' anxiety/uncertainty. Many participants did not consider themselves members of Finnish society, and some felt they were strangers. The findings highlighted the important role of communication as an AUM thematic principle and propose a set of axioms to AUM theory that focuses more on the different dimensions of communication in an intercultural context. Given the importance of context in the study of communication issues, further studies are recommended to understand the intercultural issues of students of other nationalities in different contexts.

**Keywords:** *International students, intercultural challenges, Finnish culture, anxiety-uncertainty management theory.*

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### 1. Introduction

International students are defined as “those who are not residents of their country of study or those who received their prior education in another country” (OECD 2013, p.1). In 2019, there were more than 6 million international students, and this number is expected to increase worldwide. This growth has made higher education a major driver of economic competition in a knowledge-based global economy. The United States (U.S) and the United Kingdom (UK) with the top 10 universities in the world are the top 10 attractive destinations for international students. Countries attempt to improve employment skills and reduce the anxiety and uncertainty of the educated by increasing the quality of teaching and providing better conditions in educational institutions and society.

International students often face different social and academic challenges in the new environment, especially students from Asian and African countries. The United States is the first destination for international students. International students there, however, experience adjustment problems such as culture shock, homesickness, loss of social support, discrimination, language barriers, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and academic adjustment (Almurideef, 2016). Likewise, In the UK, which is the first attractive country for international students in Europe, English language proficiency and financial difficulties have been reported as the initial issues for international students (Khanal & Gaulee, 2019). Non-academic challenges included homesickness, feeling isolation, stress, depression, cultural shock (Cowley & Ssekasi, 2018; Alloh, Tait & Taylor, 2018). Even in Asia, Widiasih and Hermayanti (2020) after analysis of the six articles found that international students studying in Indonesia encountered such challenges as cultural adaptations, language problems, and differences in the education system. Finland is known for its educational system. However, it is not among the top destination countries for international students. Living in Finland poses some cultural and geographical challenges for international students (Hosseini & Kotilainen, 2021). Understanding the challenges of international students is crucial to their academic and social success (Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). Accordingly, the aim of this study is to investigate the social and academic challenges of international students in Finland.

### **1.1. Finnish transnational space**

Finland is located in northern Europe with a small population (less than 6 million people) with a relatively homogeneous ethnic community. It is one of the northernmost countries in the world to be exposed to severe climate. Finnish language is one of the most difficult languages to belong to the Baltic-Finnic branch of the Finno-Ugric languages. Finland is known for having the best education system and recognized the happiest countries for four years. However, the latest Global Competitiveness Report 2017-2018 ranks Finland 10<sup>th</sup> (and third category) in the world after Switzerland and the United States (Global Competitiveness Report, 2018). Although Finland itself has been on the list of brain drain countries for many years (Zaraf, & Kantola, 2019; Juvonen, 2020), many international students are studying in Finland. According to Statistics Finland (2020), the number of incoming students in Finland is higher than the number of students going abroad, and 75% of incoming students use the Erasmus+ program of the European Union. While the total number of students in education leading to a qualification or degree was 1.29 million (in 2018), the number of international students in Finland was higher than the OECD average (in 2017). One in four international students in higher education is from the European Union/ European Economic Area and the rest are from other countries (ICEF, 2017). International students face challenges in their education and life, and the present study examines the challenges those Iranian students encounter as part of international students, both in academic and non-academic settings in Finland.

### **1.2. The context of the study**

Due to the Iranian nationality of the researcher, Iranian students in Finland are selected as a sample to study the challenges of international students. Iran, with a population of more than 82 million, is located in the Middle East. The literacy rate for the adult male population is 91.19%, and 82.52% for females which is assumed significant among the Middle East countries. In 2014, Iran ranked first in brain drain in the world. The Financial Tribune (2016) reported that according to a survey conducted by the Islamic Association of the University, out of 232 students, about 64% of students thought they might leave Iran for any reason and only 14% were 100% sure they would stay. It seems that many Iranian students studying abroad are thinking of migrating to the host country after graduation. The sample of this study includes Iranian students who have enrolled in various universities in Finland in the 2017-2018 academic year.

### **1.3. Theoretical framework**

This study examines the challenges of Iranian students in Finland based theory of Anxiety-Uncertainty Management (AUM). William B. Gudykunst (2005) introduced AUM to explain how humans communicate effectively based on their anxiety and uncertainty in social situations. He assumed that at least one person in an intercultural encounter is a stranger that experiences both anxiety and uncertainty; they do not feel secure, and they are not sure how to behave (Griffin, 2006).

The format of AUM includes 47 axioms, which in turn converge on one another, moving in the direction of effective communication. These axioms are defined by various variables (e.g., self-concepts, motivation, reactions to strangers, social categorization, situational processes, connections with strangers, ethical interactions, anxiety, uncertainty, mindfulness, and effective communication). They are responsible for effective communication. AUM focuses on interpersonal and intergroup levels of communication. Based on AUM mindfulness is the optimized level of communication in which ingroup members and strangers can reduce their uncertainty and anxiety (Griffin, 2006). In this study, the axioms of AUM are employed to analyse the intercultural challenges of Iranian students in Finnish society.

## **2. Methodology**

A phenomenological approach has been employed to understand the experiences and perspectives of Iranian students in the university environment as well as in Finnish society. According to the researcher's nationality, Iranian students from different universities in Finland were selected by snowball sampling method until saturation was achieved. Participants were interviewed in semi-structured interviews in Persian language, because the same language in data collection reduces any cultural bias and the risk of misunderstanding between the interviewer and the interviewee (Neyer & Harzing 2008). The participants included 14 males and 11 females. The questions provided data on immigration background, participants' perceptions, and experiences of Finnish society. The data were transcribed, coded, and categorized, and in the next step, the themes were defined accordingly, and the results of study are classified into academic and social challenges.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Academic challenges

Participants' views on the university system and the teaching and learning process in Finland are summarized in Table 1. The data showed that many participants believed that their universities had good facilities. The participant 21 noted that *"everything is well designed. The university is always open, the accommodation is good, the gym is available."* Some participants were satisfied with their access to scientific resources. In contrast, lack of jobs and funding along with complexity of the content on university websites and access the right information of the university and also many Finnish language emails were annoying. *"The websites here are very complicated. To know anything, I must send an email and ask someone and then they send me the link to that webpage. There is definitely a way to make that site more usable"*. Participant 16 stated.

Table 1. Challenging and Comforting Factors in Finnish Academic System.

Categories	Factors	Participants	
Academic system	Studying Facilities	21, 23, 18, 17, 11, 10, 9, 8, 6, 2, 23	Comforting
	Digitalization	20, 7, 5	Comforting
	Less Censorship	18, 1	Comforting
	Less stress	16, 2	Comforting
	Helpful Staff	16	Comforting
	Fund Opportunities or Students' work	22, 16, 6, 3	Challenging
	Information issues	18, 7, 16	Challenging
Learning and teaching process	Flexibility in Courses	5, 3, 6	Comforting
	Teacher-student relationship	19, 15, 12, 11, 19, 4	Challenging
	Student centered teaching	23, 20, 22, 19, 12, 2	Comforting
	Research-based teaching	7, 1	Comforting
	Poor lecture quality	15, 5, 2, 12, 4, 2, 21, 17, 1	Challenging
	Teachers' knowledge and skills	19, 23, 17, 13, 7, 6, 10, 7, 2.	Challenging
	Less stress in examination	1, 12, 11, 3, 25	Comforting
	Assignments are helpful	21, 25	Comforting

Since all participants had experience studying at universities in Iran (and other countries), they were constantly comparing their experiences at Finnish universities with the previous ones. Some participants believed that the relationship between students and teachers is cold in Finnish universities. Participants 23 and 18 believed that this relationship is closer between the supervisors and their PhD students. They found that the Finnish education system is mostly student-centered and research-based, that Finnish lectures are very weak (15, 5, 2) and that they mainly teach reading on PowerPoints. (12, 4, 2). They believed that the content they had received in Iranian universities was richer (17, 1).

Many participants criticized the quality of Finnish teachers and their teaching style because they avoid being challenged (23) and are not responsible for answering questions (19, 23). They are not motivated (17) or are not active enough (13). Finnish lecturers usually have a monotone voice (7, 6) and only transmit information (10, 7, 2). However, some participants noted that Finnish teachers although do not have extensive knowledge (13) and their knowledge is limited and narrow, professional (23, 3) and deep (13, 10). Sometimes Finnish teachers know more than Iranian teachers (2). Iranian teachers know the generalities (13) and are like encyclopedias (19). One PhD student (16) compared her experience in Iranian university with Finnish university and said: *"In Iran, the content is very theoretical. I think I was suffered in the 4 years of my bachelor's degree, but in the 2 years of my master's degree I learned more. But I think we need more theory here"*. The participants saw less stress due to the number of exams (12), especially compared to Iranian universities (12, 1, 21, 25).

Overall, the results showed that in the Finnish academic system, although there are cases of dissatisfaction with Finnish teachers and their teaching methods, none of them causes anxiety or uncertainty, but rather reduces the anxiety / uncertainty of international students in Finland.

#### 3.2. Social (non-academic) challenges

Language is important for communicating, making friends, and finding a job. Most of the participants had some Finnish language courses but only two participants could speak Finnish. Some of the participants believed that learning the Finnish language is necessary if someone wants to have a non-academic job or stay in Finland because most Finns can speak English. In contrast, some other participants found it difficult to obtain correct information due to language inadequacy, which is presented as a set of axioms based on AUM theory. For example, participant 12 stated: *"In most places,*

Finnish is spoken. Even at international conferences where we expect to hear English. *"I do not understand much of the news I receive"*.

Language can be a problem for making friends. But participants were confused if the communication problem was due to the Finnish language or culture. Uncertainty increases due to the inability to predict and explain one's own and others' behavior, and according to AUM theory, mindfulness occurs when people are conscious of their own and others' behaviors and are less likely to misunderstand. However, many participants are confused about some behaviors in communicating with Finns. For example, participant 9 states: *"We work together one day and the day after that when we see each other it is as if we don't know each other"*. Sometimes a cold reaction can lead to misunderstandings and doubts. Three PhD students who have previously lived and studied in other European country were confused about the meaning of some Finns' reactions. *"I still don't know what they mean in their talks or their actions. When I say something and my colleague leaves the room, how does he feel? He is upset with me or not"*, participant 18 said. Participant 24 states *"I always criticize my behaviors because I get suspicious looks"*. Similarly participant 25 said, *"I feel I should only appreciate things. I have seen when the food or service in restaurants is very bad, and the customers understand that they are angry, but they are silent and even appreciate it. It is as if they are afraid of questioning things. I think there is a hidden pressure on me to remain silent to be looked as a polite person"*. Participant 18 believes that the Finnish culture is affecting on foreigners' behaviours: *"I tried many times to make a community of international students to make more friends but unfortunately, what I see here is that the foreigners who come here become finnished... as if they have changed"*.

Many of the participants did not feel part of the Finnish society due to lack of suitable job, language skills and communication with the Finnish. Only three of the 25 participants were satisfied with their relationship and friendship in Finland. According to AUM theory, effective communication and mindfulness is the result of consciousness, which means awareness of stranger perspectives. Most participants seem to be conscious of Finnish culture and respecting privacy and silence, but this awareness is not enough to reduce their skepticism and uncertainty. They were stressed because they felt strangers and outsiders. Feeling as an outsider reduced the effectiveness of communication between the two cultures. In addition, darkness and cold in Finland and the lack of job opportunities, along with the feeling of homesickness and missing Persian art, poem, and talk, nostalgia for the streets of Iran, friendship, relationship, and foods were other factors that made the participants feel lonely in Finland.

#### **4. Discussion**

This study shows a smooth and comfortable Finnish education system for Iranian students. Although many participants had obstacles in finding a job or making friends, they were not stressed by the lack of Finnish language skills due to their English skills and those of the Finns. This result supported the claim of Acioly-Regnier et al. (2014) that conflicts and misunderstandings are not only because of insufficient knowledge of language, but inadequate cultural knowledge. Further misunderstanding between the two cultures increases uncertainty and decrease satisfactory intercultural interaction (Rajan et al., 2021). While a previous study indicated the effect of lecturer to reduce uncertainty and increase intercultural adjustment in international students (Chan et al., 2021), the teaching and relationship of Finnish teachers with students is not satisfactory for Iranian students. In addition, access to information on Finnish university websites does not seem to meet the needs of international students, however none of them causes students concern because of the possibility of asking others (Hosseini et al., 2020). The issue of access to information is found on other Finnish websites else than university websites (Hosseini & Hytonen, 2022). Many of the participants did not identify themselves as members of Finnish society and felt outsiders. This finding is consistent with the situation of US and British students at Japanese universities, who orient themselves to intercultural rather than intercultural contact because host nationals react to them as foreigners (Taniguchi, 2022).

#### **5. Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlighted the important role of communication as an AUM thematic principle. Lack of local language and communication skills acts as a link between international students and foreigners, thereby increasing their anxiety. The study recommends another set of axioms for AUM theory that focuses more on the different dimensions of communication in an intercultural context. Indeed, further studies focusing on communication aspects are suggested to provide a broader perspective on the lives of international students. Conclusively, a set of axioms for AUM theory with a greater focus on different dimensions of communication in an intercultural context is proposed.

It is noteworthy that educated people are the human capital of any country. Informal tracking of participants by the author shows that most of the PhD researchers interviewed in this study left Finland

for other European countries after graduation, including those who expressed their satisfaction with living in Finland. Reasons can be geographical reasons, language issues, job opportunities and cultural issues or unconscious self-censorship in responding to the interview. Hence, further studies are suggested to understand the reasons for the migration of international students not only to Iranian students but also to other nationalities in Finland. It is noteworthy that attracting educated people from Asian and African countries can help the Finnish economy.

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