

Mexican Postgraduate Students' Expectations and Perception of UK Academic System: Cultural Differences During the Early Weeks

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Abstract: Based on Hofstede's (1986) 4-D model of cultural differences, this article explores the expectations for institutional support as well as the initial perception of the educational system of a group of Mexican postgraduate students in a British university. The data presented here derive from a doctoral case study. They involve a qualitative questionnaire, focus groups, and individual interviews with ten participants enrolled for the 2016-2017 academic year. Despite participants' ultimate goal of a degree but in accordance with the core values of a collectivist society, this study found pre-departure concerns were for the institutional provision of activities to socialize and feel connected with the host environment. Upon arrival, different extents of dealing with uncertainty had an affective impact on adaptation of participants, who longed for more structure. Based on a comparison between degrees of power distance, individualism and uncertainty avoidance features, participants' accounts – in accordance with Paulo Freire's liberating pedagogy – showed satisfaction for the student-centered approach rendered.

Keywords: academic system, cultural differences, Hofstede's dimensions, international students.

1. Introduction

Research to document international experience has been vast. International students have been known to face challenges in their sojourn. While the difficulties faced while abroad might be the same or similar among the various groups of international students, their extent or impact varies depending in part on cultural values (Furnham & Bochner 1982, Hofstede 1986). Bearing that in mind, taking a one-size-fits-all approach, where minority groups of international students are grouped as "other", might not be a sound tactic.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics reported that, in 2017, the top two countries with outbound international students were China and India, whilst the three main destinations were the USA, UK and Australia. The top two international student populations in the UK are of Chinese and Indian origin. Unsurprisingly, the bulk of studies related to international student mobility has been focused on Asian students, especially from inland China (Zhang & Goodson 2011).

The list of themes exploring Chinese international students in higher education in the USA, UK and Australia are all-encompassing, allowing for a deeper understanding of these students' cultural values and how those value interact in these three contexts. Meanwhile, international students of Latin American origin are recognized as a population that has been understudied (Delgado-Romero & Sanabria 2007, Urban *et al.* 2010, Foley 2013, Tanner 2013). This is true even in contexts like the USA despite its acknowledgement as these students' first choice of destination country. It leaves room to wonder what the students' trajectory is based on their own distinctive cultural profile, especially in contexts like the UK, where they are a much less represented population (OECD Education at a Glance 2014). This

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paper sets out to examine cultural differences in teaching and learning styles of two educational contexts: Mexico and the UK. The academic experience of a group of Mexican students pursuing a postgraduate degree in the UK, during their first month overseas, was captured to analyze differences between the two educational systems. To address the intercultural challenges of international student mobility, two approaches drawn from the fields of intercultural communication and pedagogy – Hofstede’s four-dimensional (4-D) model of cultural differences and Freire’s banking system of education – were combined.

2. Literature review

Hofstede’s (1986) 4-D model of cultural differences – individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity – has been regarded as relevant to explaining difficulties arising in intercultural encounters. Hofstede’s model emerged from data captured on work-related values at a national level in over 50 countries. Caution should be taken as, within one society, differences in the dimensions are likely to be found. Nevertheless, the 4-D model might be of use for interpreting the cross-cultural differences participants encountered between home and host academic system. Although Hofstede has continued to develop his model and nowadays presents two more constructs – long-term orientation and indulgence (Hofstede Insights n.d.) – this paper employs the original model as its basis given that Hofstede (1986) specifically applied them to cross-cultural teacher/student interaction.

The first dimension, collectivist vs. individualist, concerns a society's collective attitudes. In a collectivist society, bonds between society's members are assumed to be strong; there is individual and collective concern about the in-group “in exchange for loyalty” (Hofstede Insights n.d.). In individualist societies, primary interest lies in looking after oneself and one's immediate family. Mexico has been classified as collectivist and the UK as individualist (Hofstede Insights n.d.). In a collectivist society, maintaining harmony in the learning environment is expected at all times; whereas, in an individualist society, engagement in discussions is perceived as beneficial. Losing face is frowned upon in a collectivist society but holds little value in an individualist society (Hofstede 1986).

The second dimension, power distance, refers to the degree in which inequality is accepted in a society by less influential people. Inequality exists in every society; however, some cultures are more accepting towards it than others (Hofstede 1986: 307). Along these lines, Mexico is known to be more accepting of inequality while the UK stands on the other side with much less tolerance towards hierarchy (Hofstede Insights n.d.). In a large power-distance society like Mexico, the value of learning rests on the excellence of the teacher, who is to be respected by the students; the teacher initiates communication and invites students to participate. In a small power-distance society such as the UK, success is based on the extent of two-way communication in class whereby students are expected to speak freely and argue against their teacher (Hofstede 1986: 313).

The third dimension, uncertainty avoidance, concerns the degree to which people from different cultures “feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations” (Hofstede Insights n.d.) and the way they react to circumstances understood as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable (Hofstede 1986). Societies categorized as very high uncertainty avoidance like Mexico show preference for structured learning environments with clear objectives, itemized tasks, fixed schedules, focus on accuracy rather than problem solving, and a regard for teachers as all-wise. Societies regarded as low uncertainty avoidance like the UK show preference for learning scenarios with unstructured learning conditions, where “vague objectives, broad assignments, [and] no timetables” are valued and where teachers are entitled to say “I don’t know” (Hofstede 1986: 314).

Finally, a society high on masculinity has “competition, achievement and success” as the core values instilled through school up until organizational life begins (Hofstede Insights n.d.). In a masculine society, the ideal is to be “assertive, ambitious and competitive”; in a feminine society, it is to look after the “non-material quality of life” (Hofstede 1986: 308). The difference between these two values shapes the drives people have in life, whether it is to be “the best” (masculine) or “like what you do” (feminine) (Hofstede Insights n.d.). Both Mexico and the UK are classified as highly masculine, with the UK scoring just a little lower than Mexico (Hofstede Insights n.d.). Both societies appreciate teachers publicly complimenting and otherwise rewarding their best apprentices; their students are directed toward the selection of programs that will bring them the greatest professional opportunities.

The Pedagogy of the Oppressed by the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, the father of critical pedagogy, has been acknowledged as one of the most prominent additions to traditional pedagogy (Olmeda & Luque, 2020). His work on education and the struggle for liberty focused on South America. Although developed fifty years ago and facing criticisms for its repetition, dated references and idealistic recommendations, the work remains relevant, even as “much of modern education still falls embarrassingly short of Freire’s vision” (Bhattacharya 2019: 2). Within intercultural education, Freire’s pedagogy is “a valid and effective tool to change the social reality” by challenging prejudices in today’s multicultural world and embracing “the values of equality, justice, solidarity and peace” (Maglivia 2019: 389).

In charge of the literacy training of thousands of Brazilians, Freire felt that education followed an automated scheme, which he called the banking system of education. Within this system, the educator is an indisputable agent whose task is to fill learners with content considered “only extracts of reality, detached from the totality in which they are generated and, in whose context, they make sense” (Freire 1970: 77). The role of the teacher is to deposit, transfer, and transmit values and knowledge; while that of the students is to listen, memorize, and recite the input received without acknowledging what it actually means or implies. The student is a passive depository who only stores concepts, leaving no room for the creativity needed for the transformation of learning.

Under this banking approach to education, knowledge is understood as “a donation of those who consider themselves as knowledgeable upon those whom they consider as ignorant” (Freire 1970: 79). Knowledge will always be possessed by the educators, while learners will always begin by knowing nothing. Freire argued that such a fixed ideology denies knowledge as inquiry and therefore impedes the development of critical awareness. Such lack of consciousness satisfies the interests of the oppressors. Thinking critically is perceived as dangerous.

A key premise of the banking system of education is the asymmetrical relationship between educator and apprentice. There cannot be room for a horizontal relationship if instructors are to maintain their role as the source and students as the recipients of knowledge. Freire suggested a liberating approach to education in which knowledge and values cannot be narrated or transmitted passively to pupils. Education takes on a dynamic nature in which human beings, through dialogic interaction, transform their understanding of reality. The arguments of powerful people invested in preserving their power do not apply anymore. Apprentices become critical researchers in dialogue with the educator. While the banking system of education denies the value of dialogue, it has, for Freire, an intrinsic value for education. While the banking-system model stresses permanence, Freire’s approach reinforces change; while the banking-system model discourages critical thinking and implies immovability, Freire’s liberating approach encourages critical thinking and implies dynamism. Freire supports the creation of an educational system that is “problem posing”, in which students reflect on their learning and question “why things are the way they are”, while

instructors are a guide in their “journey of revelation” (Bhattacharya 2019: 2). Maviglia writes (2019: 388) that Freire’s pedagogy sets out “to empower every human being to be a person, an autonomous subject, and emancipator of his/her own life situation, regardless of where he/she lives and works”.

3. Research method

Data was taken from ongoing doctoral research setting out to examine the adaptation experience of Mexican postgraduate students in a British University. The purpose of this study was to gather participants’ perspectives on the UK academic system in comparison with Mexico during their first month of stay -- an aim best fulfilled with a qualitative snapshot case study (Thomas 2016). The idea was to capture participants’ expectations prior to arrival (Schartner 2014) with the expectation that, on arrival, a clash between host and home cultural values was likely (Hall 1976, Furnham 1993, Ward *et al.* 2001). The findings reported here come from a qualitative online questionnaire distributed two weeks before participants’ departure, while still in Mexico; two focus groups; and one-on-one semi-structured interviews (Newcomer *et al.* 2015) conducted in the third week and fourth week of participants’ stay in England. The findings reflect the variety of insights from participants, who collaborated at one or more of the data-collection stages. Methodological triangulation, which facilitates corroborating evidence from different stances, was used. The use of different methods of inquiry compensated for any possible limitations of one or another method (Guba 1981).

Mexican participants were chosen as the leading subset of international students from Latin America in the UK. Likewise, the site for the study was selected as having one of the highest concentrations of Mexican students in the UK at the time the research was being developed. There was an element of convenience as the researcher belonged to the same ethnic group as the participants and was pursuing her PhD in the chosen university. To ensure that the researcher’s interpretations did not supplant those of participants (Guba 1981, Creswell 2014), a reflective journal was kept to monitor the researcher’s insights as the research advanced (Hellawell 2006). Conscious of the risk that constant engagement with participants might create (Guba 1981), I decided neither to become part of the Mexican community in the institution nor befriend participants on social media.

Selection of participants was based on homogeneous sampling. All were of Mexican origin pursuing postgraduate studies in a prestigious university in the southeast of England during the 2016-2017 academic year. To capture a variety of perspectives within the group (Lofland 2006) and ensure the transferability of the research (Guba 1981), characteristics such as gender, age, previous degrees, and study program were taken into consideration -- even though all Mexican postgraduate students were invited to participate. In the end, participants were four females and six males enrolled in either a master’s or PhD program, the majority registered in a STEM program. Except for one student, all were 25 years old or older at the beginning of their postgraduate studies (Richardson 1994).

The research faithfully abided by the regulations stipulated for ethics and research governance online of the institutional review board of the university. With assistance from an institutional gatekeeper and by means of an information sheet, participants were advised prior to their participation about the research purpose, implications of their participation and right to withdraw at any time. They were given a written consent form to sign (Cohen *et al.* 2011). In the case of the focus groups and interviews, it was clarified that complete anonymity could not be promised, as the researcher herself was conducting these and knew several participants. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants so that the data itself would be anonymous (Creswell 2014, Guenther 2009).

Students were given the choice to reply in all instances either in English or Spanish. With the exception of the online questionnaire, participants opted to have the focus groups

and the interviews conducted in Spanish. All quotations appearing in this paper were translated by the researcher.

Data from the questionnaire, focus groups and interviews was analysed for themes that would identify differences between the teaching-learning context in Mexico and the UK. Upon iterated scrutiny, three themes emerged (Braun & Clarke 2006): participants' (1) prior-to-departure and (2) upon-arrival institutional support expectations and their (3) perception of the UK academic system during their first month of stay.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Prior-to-departure support expectations

There were two types of support students were expecting to receive from the university upon arrival. They expected information on cultural practices and provision of events aimed at helping them meet people.

Natalie: I hope they can give me a lot of information about activities and courses that may help me to integrate.... I notice they have a lot of activities for integrating international students.

Paloma: organizing welcoming reunions... providing spaces to allow students to interact with each other... providing students with information about [the host city] and the campus.

The relevant literature calls for balanced integration of academic and social activities (Mortimer & McLaughlin 2006) and appropriate introduction to new systems and new people (Hassanien & Barber, 2008) leading to effective integration of students into the academic and social arenas (Wilcox *et al.* 2005). Participants' expectations were for information about the host city and campus and organization of social events. Participants felt a need to be socio-culturally and emotionally confident upon arrival (Ward *et al.* 2001).

Hofstede's (1986) individualism vs. collectivism dimension lends to a deeper understanding of attitudes toward provision of social events. Coming from a collectivist society such as Mexico where developing and maintaining relationships with others is recognized as a core value for wellbeing, participants recognized the need to develop social networks quickly and feel connected upon arrival. As described by Wilcox *et al.* (2005), participants believed that the creation of new social networks was central to their integration into UK academic society.

4.2 Upon-arrival support expectations

The university advised its incoming international students to arrive the Wednesday and Thursday before the beginning of Week 0, or induction week. Participants perceived the advice as a suggestion rather than a request. Most arrived later.

Mateo (Focus Group I): [The university should] put a bit more emphasis in that you should try to arrive since the first days, so that you can participate in everything, see the events, the inductions, everything that's available.

Not arriving on the suggested days meant that most of the students missed the airport pick-up service offered by the institution. The few students who used the service found it "very useful" and "of great help", saving "trouble and money" and making their arrival "trouble-free". Lack of awareness was not to blame. Rather, the low uptake was attributable to a lack of understanding of what the service entailed and why it might be convenient. The loose perceptions may point towards a cultural value difference between a high and low uncertainty-avoidance society (Hofstede 1986). Mexico is, as said, a very high uncertainty

avoidance society, in which “there is an emotional need for rules”; whereas the UK is a low uncertainty-avoidance society in which people are “comfortable in ambiguous situations” (Hofstede Insights n.d.). Raising awareness of international students’ cultural profiles might help the institution optimize the delivery of information in a way that results in more successful uptake of services.

Students’ perception of an induction program as “optional” or “compulsory” played a significant role in their behavior towards it.

Armando (Focus Group II): the only induction I had was the mandatory one, the one marked on the timetable that was for all the school... the one you’ve got to be there because you’ve just got to be there.

Daniel (Focus Group I): More than inductions, I think they were like activities, the tour on campus, because everything else I attended and that I found, was compulsory of my faculty.

Diego (Focus Group I): I was expecting something a bit more... orderly, more structured....

The invitation to partake in the induction program appeared to have been interpreted based on cultural values. There seemed to be a mismatch between the institutional message trying to be conveyed and the way participants received it. This could be a consequence of how one deals with uncertainty. High uncertainty-avoidance societies like Mexico seek security and are uncomfortable with ambiguity, which raises anxiety. Uncertainty avoiders feel vulnerable in unknown conditions and at ease in structured situations; the opposite applies in low uncertainty-avoidance cultures like the UK (Hofstede 1986, Hofstede Insights n.d.). Upon arrival there was “an emotional need for rules” (Hofstede Insights n.d.) and that appears to explain the expectation for something more structured, while the only perceived induction event was the “mandatory” one; other events were perceived as “very informal”, “optional” activities.

4.3. Perception of the UK educational system

During the first month of stay, the UK educational system was overall well-regarded. It was recognized as an opportunity that extended students’ horizons and helped them develop their critical thinking skills while taking a more active stance toward their learning process.

The power-distance dimension (Hofstede 1986) is premised on the idea that power inequality is present in all cultures; nonetheless, the degree to which this inequality is accepted varies from culture to culture. As mentioned, Mexico can be classified as a large power-distance, hierarchical society, where the less influential await the consent of those with power. The UK can be classified as a small power-distance society where inequality is not accepted. Hofstede claims that, in large power-distance societies like Mexico, education is teacher-centered. The teacher is regarded as a guru who transmits wisdom and deserves respect from the students. Hence, the expectation is for teachers start the communication and lead the way. Consequently, learners are expected to follow the paths indicated by the teacher. The UK academic system, as part of a small power-distance society in which the truth can emanate from any knowledgeable individual, values students’ independence. UK academia follows a student-centered approach (Hofstede 1986). The value of the learning process rests on the extent of communication in class, in which learners are encouraged to initiate communication, allowed to challenge the teacher’s view and prompted to cultivate their critical thinking skills. Participants considered the encouragement to develop critical reasoning skills an improvement and even the best part so far in their study-abroad experience:

Julia (interview): I was used to... someone coming and imposing an idea, and here it's totally the opposite.... It forces you more to think, ...to create your own opinion.... It lends itself to dialogue; I think that's what I've liked the most....

Sara (interview): I think in Mexico we don't have much the culture of self-study.... I have a subject... in which I don't understand everything, so you have to... at least have read and [have] checked the information previously, so you can understand and keep up with the pace....

The encouragement to discussion and debates in class was recognized as a new and enjoyable element:

Enrique (interview): ...Perhaps a lot of us are not used to [debates], ...but you can throw [out] your comment, and another one says 'no, that's not true'... and so the instructor starts to mediate.... That's very nice.

Hofstede's (1986) collectivist/individualist dimension could help illuminate why taking an active role in class was widely acknowledged as a benefit. In a collectivist society like Mexico, learners mainly participate in class when directly requested to do so by the teacher; interaction is to happen in small groups only; and losing face should be avoided (Hofstede 1986). In an individualist society like the UK, students can let their voice be heard in response to an open invitation by the teacher; learners speak out in big groups; disagreement and even conflict are welcomed; and the concept of losing face is weak (Hofstede 1986).

Nevertheless, the literature shows that international undergraduate students coming to the UK from teacher-centered contexts have found the UK proneness to debate intimidating -- even bewildering (Taylor & Ali 2017). Likely the difference between these two groups of students lies on the level of study and maturity. Findings from this study seem to agree with previous claims that mature students are more apt to engage actively with their learning process (Richardson 1994, Devlin 1996, McCune *et al.* 2010).

The study's mature participants perceived the UK academic system as also being more flexible:

Armando (Focus Group II): ...Here, ...my schedule wasn't so fixed.... [That] has helped me....

Mario (interview): ...In fact, I like a bit more to work that way... without so many limits, like with more freedom.

Mexico has been categorized as a strong avoidance society. Students are used to highly structured instruction, in which little room is left for uncertainty. They are provided with specific goals, well-elaborated assignments and fixed schedules (Hofstede 1986). The opposite applies to weak uncertainty-avoidance societies like the UK, in which the approach to learning is more unstructured, with imprecise objectives, open assignments, and flexible schedules. Whether participants maintained this openness to unstructured freedom and flexibility beyond their first few weeks at university is an interesting question but one that lies outside the scope of this study.

Participants expressed no recollections of being praised by teachers for their performance, but this might be due to the study being limited to the first weeks' encounter with the UK academic system. In accordance with the preference for masculine values, most of the participants were enrolled in STEM-related disciplines with a focus on career-development opportunities.

Findings concerning participants' perception of the UK educational system revealed an association between Freire's (1970) banking-system model of education and Hofstede's

dimensions of power distance, collectivist vs. individualist, and uncertainty avoidance. Three themes emerged from this analysis: *asymmetric relationship*, *dialogic interaction* and *flexibility*.

4.3.1 Asymmetric relationship

Per participants' recollections, the pedagogy they experienced in Mexico reinforced the teacher's role as the knowledgeable agent who lectured and poured wisdom into the learners' minds; the students understood themselves to be the ignorant ones, demonstrating in this way a high acceptance for inequality and preference for the banking-system model. The development of creative solutions and critical reasoning that could empower students to transform their own learning was discouraged through top-down imposition of ideas. This resonates with the banking-system model of education, which denies the possibility of a horizontal relationship in the teaching/learning process and stresses the permanence of a highly unequal student/teacher relationship. Participants experienced a very different ideology in the UK system, where they were not meant to be repositories of knowledge but rather critical thinkers; the instructor's role was more like a guide in the apprentices' journey towards a fairer interpretation of the world. A symmetrical, teacher/student relationship could be maintained.

4.3.2 Dialogic interactions

In alignment with principles of collectivist pedagogy and the ideology of the banking-system model, the teaching/learning process participants were familiar with followed a static linear progression, in which their voice could only be heard in response to the instructor's direct request. Dialogue was discouraged and two-way communication between teacher and students not possible. Disagreement that could lead to a different interpretation of reality was discouraged. Participants encountered the dynamic nature of the UK educational system, part of an individualist society aligned with Freire's pedagogy, in which interaction is key and student dialogue with the educator actively encouraged as part of the learning process: students' voices matter. Participants in this study expressed their contentment with this approach, finding themselves able to construct and rectify their interpretation of the world through dialogic interaction with the instructor and their fellow students.

4.3.3 Flexibility

The system participants came out of was one where the delivery of knowledge was highly structured and controlled by the instructor, granting the students no opportunity to contribute, set their own work pace or manage their own learning process. Teaching/learning followed an automated scheme that did not empower students to become autonomous learners or active agents able to change their life situation. Coming to the UK, participants were given tools to become more autonomous learners, with freedom to organize their academic agenda, determine their working pace and contribute own insights. Participants appreciated the flexibility of the UK academic system, so dissimilar to the rigidity they had experienced at home.

5. Conclusions

The ultimate goal for undertaking studies in the UK was to obtain an academic degree. Nevertheless, participants' main pre-departure concerns were not related to the educational domain -- what the academic challenges would be -- but to sociocultural concerns. Participants anticipated struggles fitting in to the host culture and bouts of loneliness. Their expectations for university support focused on the provision of tools to help them manage their sociocultural and emotional needs. The desire for support navigating the new

environment reflected a concern with appropriately performing everyday tasks in accordance with the UK context (Roberts & Dunworth 2012). The emphasis given to opportunities to socialize, on the other hand, might have relation to the core values of collectivist Mexican society (Hofstede 1986). Feeling confident and well-connected with the host environment are, indeed, the basis for adapting. Participants needed to feel in control. This implies a need for more institutional assistance centered on activities to tackle students' sociocultural concerns.

This study supports previous claims (Ward *et al.* 2001) that macro-level attributes play a role in adaptation. Differing degrees of openness to dealing with uncertainty had an impact on participants' adaptation. On arrival, coming from a high uncertainty-avoidance society, participants aimed to feel secure. The flexible nature of the induction programs provided and a mismatch between student and university expectations led to students missing much of this transitional support offered. This resulted in increased ambiguity, which had an affective impact on participants. These findings call for institutional cultivation of awareness about the role of cultural values in international studies, how they affect students' well-being and, in particular, how they play out in transitional moments.

Analysis was based on comparison of Hofstede's dimensions of power distance, collectivism vs. individualism, and low vs. high uncertainty avoidance. The students' accounts of the UK academic system, in accordance with Freire's liberating pedagogy, point toward satisfaction with the non-rigid timetable, encouragement for autonomous learning, and reinforcement of critical thinking skills: overall, the student-centered approach being practiced. The freedom this student-centered approach engendered empowered students to take a more active participatory role in their learning process and realize the distinction between own and imposed ideas. Participants' levels of and openness to uncertainty were modified over time, uncertainty being highest at the beginning and decreasing towards the end of the first month of stay. Initially, there was a perceived need for structured inductions; participants strove to feel more confident with areas out of their control, such as the dynamics of the host institution and their surroundings. The same lack of structure was appreciated when it came to participants' courses given the possibilities it opened up -- in areas where perhaps they could feel more at ease, such as their own studies, choice of research project, and individual areas of interest. It remains uncertain whether participants' outlook regarding lack of structure changed as the semester progressed; the close guidance of a teacher in their home academic system might have been missed at times of uncertainty. A suggestion for future research is scrutiny of students' experience over a longer period of time.

About the author

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