

# CULTURE SHOCK EXPERIENCED BY FOREIGN STUDENTS STUDYING AT INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY

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## ABSTRACT

This present study was designed to examine the potential culture shocks experienced by foreign students in Indonesian university. There were 10 foreign students who responded to the questionnaires sent by the writer through BIPA in the foreign students' universities. It was found that there were three points of academic life that make foreign students experience culture shock. Those are teacher's roles and attitude; poorly organized program; and the local students' attitude. In social life, the writer also found that foreign students experienced culture shock in 3 aspects, those are: women-men relationship; different way of thinking and different habits.

*Keyword: Culture shock, foreign students*

## INTRODUCTION

In the year of two thousand when the Indonesian government establishes the program of **Dharmasiswa**, many foreigners from all over the world come to this country to learn Bahasa Indonesia. Since foreign students are placed in some of universities in Indonesia, the university academic atmospheres are changing accordingly. More and more students from variety of racial and cultures study in this country. The increased diversity in the student population will affect pattern of interaction between teachers and foreign students, between local students and foreign students. Many researches have tried to examine educational and cultural problems experienced by migrant students from non English speaking backgrounds at Australian universities (Samuelowicz, 1987; Bradley and Bradley, 1984).

Another case illustrates that each year some 400,000 international students enter American universities and colleges. Many of these students bring with them cultural values which can adversely affect their adaptation process. Research show, for instance, that students who have a predisposition for collectivist values have more difficulty adapting to American culture than students with a predisposition for individualist values (i.e., Asians,

Reinicke, 1986; Fernandez, 1988: Africans, Henderson & Milhouse, 1988; Henderson & Olsasji, 1994; and Iranians, Hofstede, 1980; Hecth, Anderson & Ribeau, 1989). Central to the concept of collectivism – individualism is the belief that cultures have distinctive interaction strategies or preferred styles of communicating (Kim, 1993).

However, it is a few researches tried to reveal culture shocks experienced by foreign students studying in Indonesian universities since the Dharmasiswa program is relatively new and at first only a few number of foreign students attending this program. Year by year the numbers and quotas are increased. Now there have been significant numbers of foreign students attending Dharmasiswa and other program in Indonesian universities. Since many people from different nations come to learn in Indonesian academic context, Indonesian should be aware of the potential cultural conflict and potential cultural shocks. These potential problems should be identified and minimized in order to give the foreign students and the local people an atmosphere of mutualism and understanding.

## METHODOLOGIES FOR SURVEY

An open-ended questionnaire was developed for the purpose of the study and was administered

to all Dharmasiswa students studying in some universities in Malang. Four universities in Malang which were currently appointed by the government to promote Indonesian language and culture to foreign students from all over the world: Universitas Negeri Malang (UM), Universitas Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM), Polytechnics Malang (Poltek). Each university had different number of foreign students under Dharmasiswa Program as well as had different ethnic groups. The writer with the help of BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi Penutur Asing) centers of each university obtained the contact person of foreign students. There were 10 foreign students who responded to the questionnaires sent through BIPA in the foreign students' universities. It had been stated clearly on the questionnaire that the foreign students' participation was voluntarily but strongly recommended since the number of foreign students in Malang in the year of 2008 was not very big. However, only ten out of twenty five foreign students in Malang returned the questionnaire and therefore, 10 foreign students were included in this study. All ten respondents were from English Speaking Countries especially European and Australia. There were 7 (seven) from Australia, 1 (one) from Hungary, 1 (one) from Germany, and 1 (one) from Poland. 8 (eight) of them are females and 2 (two) of them are males. All respondents age from 21 years old to 29 years old. It means that the respondents were equal to undergraduate to graduate level students. They stayed in Indonesia for one year averagely and had never been in Indonesia before. One respondent was born in Indonesia but she/he was grown up in Germany. There were also people from Eastern culture or non English Speaking Countries such as Japan, China, and Taiwan. However, no one from non-English Speaking Countries sent back the questionnaire.

Some points were revealed and asked in the questionnaire:

- What academic differences between your country and Indonesia that cause you feel series of difficulties in adjusting it?

- What social life differences between your country and Indonesia that cause you feel series of difficulties in adjusting it?

Each subject completed questionnaire individually at his or her own convenience. Name and addresses were not required on the questionnaires in order to encourage the respondents to give sincere answers. However, they were asked to give personal information only such as: age, sex, and nationality and the academic year of the students' university entrance. The obtained data was analyzed qualitatively as well in the form of narrative presentations. Everything was presented as it was. The data and responses were neither subtracted nor added to maintain the originality of the story. The next step was to find out the respondents' common answers then to create classification. If the respondents' answers had a great variety and proved inconsistent one another then the data was presented as it was.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### FINDINGS

- Academic Differences between Indonesia and Foreign Students' Countries Teacher's Role and Attitude.

Many respondents complained that teachers did not attend to the classes and too many absent which for them it was so strange and thing that rarely happened in their academic system.

*Lack of structure of subjects, plagiarism is common practice so is buying assignments. Lecturers are not turning up to classes. In Australia, we have lecturers and tutorials for each subject. Tutorials are small group discussion with 15 or so, students led by a tutor or lecturer.*

*The fact that lecturers sometimes do not come to class. The lack of reading materials. Lack of information about assessments. Lack of students' participation in classes. These aspects made me frustrated with academic life here.*

*In Indonesia, the lecturers are frequently absents, something which almost never occurs in Australia. In my country it is also common practice to give very specific schedules to students and to outline clear expectation. In Indonesia, some lecturers do this, others do not. In Australia, It is also more research based*

As above, but not difficult to adjust to. Sometimes the lecturers do not go to class and you have spent half a day waiting for it. Yes, the gap between teachers and students is wider.

Lecturers seem less available for consultation, less student participation in classes

- Poorly organized Program

Poorly-organized program and classroom organization were the major complaint to the respondents. Almost all respondents said that they got frustrated dealing with classroom organization since there were many aspects that they did not know and did not know what to do. The unwell-organization meant there were no clear information about where to get books and references, when the tests were held, and when the assignment was due. Besides, there was no clear schedule, subject outline, etc.

*Not knowing where to get text books from, when tests are on, or when assignments are due. The lack of clarity of information about these things given to students can be difficult at times.*

*I know from my relatives that the atmosphere in a university is more serious and students are treated as a grown up/adult. The requirement is higher than in Indonesia.*

*In term of academic life, I haven't encountered any serious difficulties yet. Maybe this goes only for Dharmasiswa program, but the organization is not too good and sometimes seems to be chaotic.*

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### Local Students' Attitude

Local students' attitudes were also another difficulty that foreign students had to adjust. Foreign students wanted to listen attentively on that lecture but they were distracting by the noises that some local students made. In addition, many local students might comment on rudely the foreign students' existence as if that the foreign students were a strange creature.

*Mainly language and cultural difficulties, such as a very relaxed approach to teaching and learning that often means students talk over the lecturers. Sometimes, it seems students are only there to socialize and university has become a kind of status symbol*

*A lot of people stare at me in Indonesia and yell funny comments, I understand that they are being friendly but it is still very different than in Australia.*

*Indonesian students are very loud. Sometimes they run in the corridor, make a lot of noise without taking into account the fact that other people have classes at that time. It happened to me that I couldn't hear my teacher (and the classroom was closed!) because of the students playing outside.*

### Social Life Differences between Indonesia and Foreign Students' Countries

#### Women-Men Relationship

Even though the respondents were from different country, they almost have the same opinion on women-men relationship here in Indonesia. According to them, women-men relationship in their country was more open than in Indonesia. When girls and boys went out together, it did not necessarily involve romantic feeling. They can be just a friend. In Indonesia, in contrast, two friends of the opposite sex went out together were usually considered as a lover.

*People are less individual in Indonesia, constantly surround themselves with others. In*

Australia, girl surely do thing on their own. Most social events do not involve alcohol. In Australia, girls and boys after hangout together when they are just friends. In Indonesia, it seems that indicates 'pacar' status.

Yes, especially for female-male relations are a lot more open in Australia.

People interact more on a one on a one basis in Australia, and there is more interaction between boys and girls at the friendship level

Yes. Social life in Australia is based more on long-term friendships and occasions are more often than not celebrated with a drink. In Indonesia, making friends is easy, almost too easy, and it can often be hard to realize who actually your friend is or who simply wants to hangout with a 'bule'.

#### **Collectivist Vs Individualist.**

Some respondents said that in Indonesia a bond among family members, between friend and friend, and within community was very strong. On the other hand, in the respondents' country of origin, people might do anything they want and like without much interference from family, friends, and community.

Because so many students live close to campus and away from their families there is a stronger bond between friends and people will participate in many more social activities.

I have more of a social life in Indonesia. Everyone lives close together and can hangout all the time. In Australia there is no time to do this all the time.

Yes. Here in Indonesia, people are friendly and open. Taking chances every moment to make connection with other people from foreign countries like me. In my country, people are individuals and closed. They don't care about other people. There are a lot of differences in social life. While social life in Indonesia seems to be based on a strong community feeling, it is more individual focus in Germany. People in Germany usually don't ask you about your religion or if you are already married. For me as a woman, it is not always as comfortable to behave the way I use to in Germany (e.g. smoking in public, going out alone when it's already dark)

And sometimes it feels as if people- especially older people look down on me.

People are less individual in Indonesia, constantly surround themselves with others. In Australia, girl surely do thing on their own. Most social events do not involve alcohol. In Australia, girls and boys after hangout together when they are just friends. In Indonesia, it seems that indicates 'pacar' status.

#### **Habits in Social Gatherings**

Some of the respondents also said in Indonesia the social gathering did not involve drinking activities. However, in the respondents' country of origin, it is common that social gathering involves alcohol.

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In general, the social life is similar. It is based on meeting friends, chatting, hanging out together, eating out together, etc. The difference is that in my country young people go out at night and often drink some alcohol (beer for example)

#### **Discussions**

As it has been stated before that mobility nowadays cannot be avoided. People from one context moved to the new context because of several reasons such as: business purposes, study, marriage, jobs, war, economic and political reasons. And, of course mobility might change the nature of our society, and it also affects the individuals involved. This present findings had revealed that respondents experienced culture shock both in the academic and social life.

In social life, the writer also found that foreign students experienced culture shock in three aspects, those are: women-men relationship; collectivism Vs Individual society and different habits. This finding was not very surprising as well since the 3 aspects of differences in social life were rooted from

collectivism-Individualism cultural based values. Indonesian culture was centered on collectivism while English Foreign countries were much more centered on individualism. Collectivist cultures have been described as valuing goals and interests related to the cultural group while individualist cultures tend toward personal goals and tasks (Triandis, et al., 1988; Hall, 1966; Anderson, 1985). More specifically, collectivist cultures are viewed as communal, interest sharing, harmonious and face supporting. Individualist cultures have a tendency to emphasize the needs, interests and goals of the person; thereby signaling a greater need for personal space, distance, and privacy (Triandis, et al., 1988; Hecht, Anderson & Ribeau, 1986).

Culture shock is relatively short term feeling of disorientation, of comfort due to unfamiliarity of surroundings, the lack of familiar cues in the environment. Culture shock occurs to almost all people who cross cultural boundaries, whether they have done so voluntarily or not. Most individuals then experience a long term process of more or less adapting to the new culture. However, for many individuals the long term adaptation is not easy. Some people actively resist assimilation in the short term. However, since most of respondents' length of stay was averagedly one year, the pattern of culture adaptation was integration. Integration occurs when the people have an interest in maintaining their original culture but also in the other side; they want to maintain daily interaction with other groups.

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The respondents' pattern of adaptation is not yet called assimilation. In an assimilation mode, the individual does not want to maintain an isolated cultural identity but wants to maintain relationship with other groups in the new culture. And the migrants are more or less welcomed by the new cultural hosts.

Dinges (1983) summarizes the characteristics and skills for a culturally competent individual with a six-part model. His model for cultural competent consists of: 1) the ability to accommodate new ideas and experiences; 2) cultural empathy combined with the ability to acknowledge the similarities and differences between one's own culture with others; 3) refraining from judging others based on cultural differences; 4) the ability to perform non-critical observation of one's own and another's behavior; 5) the ability to build meaningful relationships with others from different cultures; 6) minimizing feeling of ethnocentrism.

Bhawiyuk and Brislin (1992) see cultural sensitivity as the ability to perform accordance with both collectivism and individualism. In their study, cultural sensitivity is defined as the ability to identify whether individual are behaving with a collective or individualistic mindset, to be open-minded to other cultures, and to be flexible enough to behave in an appropriate manner in other cultures. They conclude that the higher one's cultural sensitivity, the more effectively one can deal with others from different cultures.

Miyamoto and Rasmussen (1998) in their quasi experimental research measured the effectiveness of Japanese language and culture. This study analyzed cross cultural competence attributes in interaction with Japanese in business setting and an instrument named CCCI (Cross-Cultural Competency Inventory) was developed. This study summarized seven points of cross cultural competence but only three points highlight my current research findings, those are (1) that in building relationship with individuals from other culture, one often faces behaviors or cultural norm which is not compatible with one's value. When this happens, one needs to be flexible enough to accept the cultural differences open-mindedly. (2) In Japan as well as in Indonesian context, it is important to build harmonious personal relationship (3) Japanese as well as Indonesian organization and people function based on collectivism. It is essential to comprehend how differently such organizations and people work from those who function based on individualism.

In academic atmosphere, foreign students stated that the teachers' roles and attitude,

poorly organized program and the local students' attitudes made them shock. Samuelowicz (1987) in her study revealed the problems faced by overseas students seen by academic staff at the University of Queensland. The problems faced by overseas students indicated academic shock. In Samuelowicz, language was seen as the highest problem faced by overseas students followed by inappropriate or poor study skill. She also found that majority of overseas students assumed that there was no difference between the Australian educational system and the educational system in their home countries. The academic shocks experienced by foreign students studying in Indonesian context were different from the academic shock experienced by foreign students studying in Australian context. These different findings were not very surprising since there was also a number of researches exploring the differences between foreign (mainly Asian) which students tended to adopt reproducing orientation characterized by memorizing on the part or the whole of materials; teachers were more active and students would be passive accordingly and Australian education systems which tended to shape the learners to be more critical and more class participation.

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In academic world, it seemed that in one side Indonesian government is eager to welcome and promote Indonesia in more international and global context but in the other side, the government did not seem to be ready to set structured, well-planned program as well as apparatus. The foreign students' comments above not only refer to the different academic system but also to poorly-organized program. Before the introduction of particular programs offered for international, the institution

is suggested to set up distinctive, clear, and structured programs. The clear agenda should have been discussed among related units and departments within the institution and external institutions. The clear agenda include: the purpose of foreign students coming to Indonesia, the departments they are going to choose, the availability of resource persons, the contact persons or the institution of their initial coming to the Indonesia, the availability of peer supports, the campus orientation program, language and cultural training and it should be accompanied by fixed and clear schedules. There are many things merit considerations as well such as the commencement of the study, class schedule, lecturer, subject and lesson guidelines, resource person or academic advisor, the availability of liaison officers where foreign students can contact this units anytime they want to get the information and experience difficulties. Furthermore, the questionnaire can be distributed before, during and after the program to get feedbacks, inputs, and ideas of the foreign students' expectations, perceptions of the running programs. Before the program, the questionnaire might ask the foreign students expectation of coming to this country and the things that they might learn and take by attending the program. During the program, the questionnaire might explore the students' opinions of the running program. The difficulties they might encounter in attending this program, and whether the program offered have been implemented and satisfied. After program questionnaire might ask foreign students to give feedback and inputs of the running program. It is very essential for the institutions to plan, organize, establish and evaluate the program so that the improvement can be planned and achieved.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The result of this study indicates that foreign students studying in Indonesian context also experience culture shock. Culture shock is relatively short term feeling of disorientation, of discomfort due to the unfamiliarity of surroundings, the lack of familiar cues in the environment. The responses vary from confusion, disappointment, frustration, to depression sometimes the withdrawal from the new culture itself. Being aware of the differences

that exist between cultures and knowing how to act when we are faced with puzzling crosscultural situations are very important skills for harmonious intercultural relations.

It had been revealed that foreign students had experienced culture shock. And the culture shock they experienced was classified into 2: in academic atmosphere and in social life. In academic atmosphere most students thought the teachers' roles and attitude, poorly-organized program and the local students' attitudes made them shock. In relation with teachers' role and attitude, it is suggested that the department or institution selects the teachers who are going to handle foreign student class. If it is difficult due to limited capable human resource, the pointed teachers should be given a chance to follow the short training of academic culture in order to equip them with sufficient information of different education system. Indonesian teachers usually put themselves as a figure of authority and it might not be compatible with foreign students' context in which teachers act as facilitators.

It is strongly recommended that foreign students who are going to come to this country should join the pre-departure program. This pre-departure program is usually offered in their home country or the host country. This program will equip the students with language training or and cross cultural understanding training so that they will get the right information how to behave in their host country and be ready with cultural adaptation process.

The host institutions should involve the local students to welcome the foreign students so that the cultural exchanges occur. The local students might learn the new way of life and the way of thinking from foreign students and the foreign students do too. This way will help people from different context understand each other and in the long run it will help them to learn of being more tolerant. Welcoming program can be established from the first stage of the foreign students' arrival such as the airport pick up, to familiarize with the transport system, shopping system, banking system, university's facilities, renting house system, visiting cultural sites, and many more.

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