



**A STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL VIETNAMESE UNDERGRADUATE  
STUDENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIOCULTURAL AND ACADEMIC  
ADAPTATION AND ADJUSTMENT AT A HIGHER EDUCATION  
INSTITUTION IN THAILAND**

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## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the processes of adjustment of Vietnamese undergraduate students (VUs) when they were studying at a higher education institution in Thailand. Its aims were to explore students' challenges or difficulties and strategies they employed to overcome the difficulties they experienced in their sojourn. This quasi-longitudinal study was conducted over six months to investigate three main areas of students' adjustment, namely: psychological, sociocultural, and academic.

A multiple-methods research designed was adopted with semi-structured interviews, and focus groups as key data collection instruments. The data was collected from students who were enrolled in Bachelor Degree programmes in General Management Science, Science, and Technology and one group of students who attended a preparative course at one of the fastest growing Thai universities.

The data collection was conducted in multiple phases. The semi-structure interviews were twice with ten participants. The first interview (T1) was conducted at the beginning of the new semester (weeks 5<sup>th</sup>- 6<sup>th</sup>), and the second interview (T2) was carried out in the 26<sup>th</sup> teaching week. Focus groups were conducted in the 13<sup>th</sup> teaching week with eight volunteers of each group.

The findings indicated that all three domains of students' successful adjustment were closely related to gaining sufficient contact and support from co-nationals and host nationals. In the psychological domain, it was found that several students held a positive belief, framed as 'self-efficacy' and used it as a stress coping strategy, while many students mentioned religious coping, such as making merit which related to their positive psychological and sociocultural adjustment. The findings revealed culturally specific stress-coping strategies often utilised by Asian international students but rarely used by Western college students. The most important factor which enhanced students' sociocultural adjustment was friendship networks with host-nationals. Along with the close cultural distance, which made students feel connected with the host culture, the longer length of residence in the host country cultivated students' sociocultural adjustment. In academic domain, academic Thai language was a significant factor which had a great effect on their academic adjustment.

The findings gained from this study gives a fine-grained view on international students' experiences which is an "intra-Asian phenomenon". It makes significant contributions to an understanding of international students' adjustment processes in a non-English speaking

country and fills an existing gap in cross-cultural research. The research approaches can be applied in studies with other groups of students, particularly, South East Asian student groups who study in Thailand. It is also hoped that the findings of this research can be applied to enrich the quality and efficiency of Higher Education in Thailand. They can be used as guidelines for Higher Education institutions in making policies, planning, devising proactive strategies, and conducting effective public relations exercises in educational management in terms of university academic management and counselling in order to support international students when they study in Thailand.

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that this thesis is my own work. I have correctly acknowledged the work of others and no parts of the material offered has been previously submitted by me for any other award or qualification in this or any other university.

Nattaya Srisakda

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## DEDICATION

*To my beloved late grandmother and grandfather, Tien and Ma Panthong*

*To my beloved mother and father, Nonglak and Sompong Srisakda*

*To my beloved aunts, Hatsana Panthong Piapueng and Sompak Panthong Limwattana*

&

*To my beloved nephews, Thanapat, Thanarat, Thanalak*

*and nieces, Papatjitra and Sapunrada Srisakda*

*Without my family's constant love, courage and compassion, this thesis would not exist.*

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ACA	Academic adaptation
AEC	ASEAN Economic Community
ASEAN	The Association of Southeast Asian Nations
HE	Higher education
IC	Intercultural competence
ISs	International students
ISM	International student mobility
MPQ	The multicultural personality questionnaire
PWB	Psychological wellbeing
SCAS	The Socio-Cultural Adaptation Scale
TLP	Thai language proficiency
UMAP	The University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific Project
VUs	Vietnamese undergraduate students



# Chapter 1. Introduction

The aim of this introductory chapter is to give a full explanation as to why this study is necessary. The chapter comprises eight parts. Firstly, the general background of student mobility leading to the importance of the study is given (1.1). Second, the background and justification for conducting this research are presented (1.2), followed by the third part, which concerns the evolution of higher education and internationalisation in Thailand (1.3). Fourth, a current report on the number of international students in Thailand is described in detail (1.4). Fifth, key concepts and key words of the study are introduced (1.5). Sixth, the aims of the study and research questions are presented (1.6), followed by a discussion of the significance of this study (1.7). Finally, the structure of this thesis is presented (1.8).

## 1.1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, the number of international students (ISs) in higher education (HE) has tremendously increased across the world. Traditionally, the flow of international student mobility (ISM) has been directed toward economically developed countries with popular languages (e.g., English, French and Spanish). Several studies conducted in recent decades have revealed that the main senders of ISs are Asian countries and the primary receivers are economically developed countries with the noted first languages; the main pattern of ISM follows an East-West axis (Chen and Barnett, 2000; OECD, 2015; Barnett *et al.*, 2016; Kondakci *et al.*, 2017). Yet as formerly less important players in global economic affairs have become increasingly inter-connected with the flows and processes of, a concomitant phenomenon has a growing tendency among ISs to travel to study in their geographic home region (OECD, 2015).

Internationalisation of HE is one of the ways a country responds to the impact of globalisation (Llego, 2014). “The internationalisation agenda in higher education is seen as one of international, national, institutional and personal significance based on reciprocal relationships” (Leask, 2010, p. 3). Internationalisation in education is often considered by policy makers and educators as “a positive force” that prepares graduates for a “globalised society” (Leask, 2010, p. 3) by creating “an open, tolerant and cosmopolitan university experience” (Kalantzis and Cope, 2000, p. 31 as cited in Leask, 2000) and also fostering “the cultural bridges and understanding necessary for world peace” (Slethaug, 2007, p. 5 as cited in Leask, 2000).



“In the Asia Pacific, the internationalisation of HE has been launched through the concept of education hubs” (Kell and Vogl, 2012, p. 67). The concept of an education hub has brought an image of an integrated relationship between education sectors, business and international students. Internationalisation brings about a “flow of knowledge and cultures across national boundaries” (Slethaug, 2007, p. 5). Through internationalisation, “student mobility brings people from different backgrounds and cultures together on campus and will result in the development of transformative cross-cultural understandings and friendships which will lead naturally to this flow of knowledge and culture”(Leask, 2010, p. 3). However, each country differs in character and context and “responds to internationalisation differently and offers various interpretations of the concept” (Lavankura, 2013, p. 663).

The phenomenon of student mobility to study within the South-East Asia region has been booming for a decade. Yet to date not a great amount of literature is available to shed light on the phenomenon in this region. This current study was conducted in the Thai context, and seeks to provide an insightful understanding of several unique aspects of international students in this particular region, thereby contributing to filling the gap in the existing literature. The study focuses on international Vietnamese undergraduate students’ processes of adjustment in Thailand. Thus, the following section will provide some background on HE in South-East Asia, and then, more specifically, on Thailand. Then, the justification for conducting this research is provided.

## **1.2 Background and Rationale for the Study**

The internationalisation of HE in South-East Asia is happening at a rapid pace, and is contributing towards the fulfilment of the ‘ASEAN Community.’ The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) was founded in 1967. Today, ASEAN comprises 10 member countries: Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam and Thailand. ASEAN is based on three pillars: ASEAN Political-Security Community, ASEAN Economic Community, and ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. Its goal is aimed at enhancing cooperation and development in politics, economy, society, culture, education and other aspects of life among the member countries, as stated in its motto ‘One Vision, One Identity, One Community’ (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2016).



Figure 1.1 The Ten Member Countries of ASEAN<sup>1</sup>

ASEAN is one of the largest economic zones in the world. The total trade increased by US\$ 700 billion between 2007 and 2015, with intra-ASEAN trade comprising the largest share of ASEAN's total trade. In 2015, the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) was collectively the third largest economy in Asia and the sixth largest in the world (Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 2016). In late 2015, the AEC was officially established by the agreement made by the ten member countries. The AEC has been a major milestone in the regional economic integration agenda in ASEAN. The aim of the establishment is to transform the whole region into 'the single ASEAN' market and the main goal is to enhance a freer flow of capital, professional and skilled human resources, workforce, goods, services, and investments (Asean Secretariat, 2008). The AEC links the connectivity of people from the same region but having different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, which strengthens the ASEAN Community.

Education is regarded as a vital element that fosters the formation of the ASEAN community. As ASEAN itself states, 'a closer cooperation in education and human resource development will empower the people of ASEAN and strengthen the ASEAN Community' (ibid.). The formation of the AEC opens a door of wealth of opportunities of integration, collaboration and competitiveness among HE institutions within the ASEAN region. Like many countries in South-East Asia which aspire to be a regional education hub, the Royal Thai Government aims to internationalise tertiary education in the country. The Royal Thai Government has given high priority to upgrade Thai universities to achieve an international standard of excellence in order attract more ISs. Thailand has set a target to increase the number of

<sup>1</sup> Source: [http://thailand.prd.go.th/1700/ewt/asean thai/ewt\\_news.php?nid=6136&filename=index](http://thailand.prd.go.th/1700/ewt/asean thai/ewt_news.php?nid=6136&filename=index)

foreign students from the current figure of 20,000 to 100,000 (Yakubb, 2015). Thailand has prepared to deal with the AEC agenda with respect to education policy and attempted to initiate international curricula to welcome and attract ISs for more than a decade (Wattanakornsiri, 2005).

In order to welcome more ISs, there has been much internationalisation activity in Thai universities to improve international student recruitment. The criteria for international curricula have been set by many educational institutions in order to reach the goal of internationalisation. For example, an international curriculum should offer courses in which the contents are related to other cultures and to contemporary global issues. English is officially approved as a medium of instruction, in addition to other foreign languages. In terms of learning environment, ISs should be able to benefit from learning and academic support facilities, exchange of academic information, foreign student advisors, good quality accommodation, and the provision of scholarships (ibid.). These matters have been addressed as preparation for entering the ASEAN Community in The Thai international educational sector (Vonganusith, 2012). More than 100 HE institutions across the country now offer international programmes (Bureau of International Cooperation Strategy, 2016).

As noted above when referring to the ‘international programme’ in Thailand, it is generally understood that this refers to the curriculum that adopts English as a medium of instruction (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014). However, each educational institution comes up with its own strategic plan to attract more international students (ibid). Instead of offering international programmes, the host university where the current study is being conducted offers an alternative to respond to the AEC, welcoming international students to study in national undergraduate programmes where teaching and learning is conducted by using the language of the host country, Thai language.

International student enrolments in Thailand are especially strong from Asia. Most students are from Thailand’s neighbouring countries (see 1.4). A recent study has revealed that there are four crucial factors that influence ISs to select Thai universities as their preferred institutions. These factors are academic and education quality, financial and economic considerations, administrative and staff support, and image and prestige of the university (Ngamkamollert and Ruangkanjanes, 2015).

However, it is inevitable that ISs who decide to pursue studies in a foreign country will be exposed to many challenges in the new host environment. International students have to struggle to meet the demand of an unfamiliar culture and people, tasks and situations.

Studying for a Bachelor Degree in Thailand generally takes 4 years, which is a long journey. The process of adjustment is vital for students to have a successful academic achievement and live happily in the long-term in the new environment.

Understanding the background of Thai HE, how the country and its universities move forward to respond to the concept of internationalisation, international student mobility can pave the way for more understanding of the Vietnamese undergraduate students' adjustment. This is the main focus of the study and will be discussed in the next section.

### **1.3 Thai Higher Education and Internationalising Higher Education in Thailand**

This section provides a brief background of Thai HE and the policy towards internationalisation.

#### ***1.3.1 Thai higher education and its institutions***

The origins of HE can be tracked back to the reign of King Chulalongkorn (King Rama V: 1868-1910). The first Thai university, Chulalongkorn University, was founded a hundred year ago, in 1917 (Pimpa, 2011). It was an initial acknowledgement that western education had an influence on Thai higher education as the “curriculum was crafted after English models” and “classes were mainly taught by foreign teachers” (Sinlarat, 2004, p. 204). Refashioning the Thai education system at that time aimed to develop a national identity as a strategic thought of ceding the colonial powers (Rhein, 2017). The American educational models dominated Thai HE after the Second World War (Pimpa, 2011). Thailand started to reform higher education in the 1990s and continues to date to catch up with global education trends.

Nowadays, HE in Thailand is provided by institutions that fall under one of two groups of organisations. Firstly, the group of state universities and private institutions for HE, technical or professional and agricultural institutions, and teacher training colleges are under the responsibility of the Ministry of Education (MOE). The second group is the group of specialised training institutions operated by various ministries or government organisations (Nuffic, 2015). The government allocates a budget to operate these institutions except the private universities and colleges.

There are 155 HE institutions nationwide consisting of 20 autonomous universities, 12 traditional universities, 39 Rajabhat universities (formerly teacher training colleges), and 9 Rajamangala universities of Technology, together with 74 private HE institutions, and the

Office of Community College Administration. The student population in HE was approximately 2.3 million in 2013 (Kanvong, 2013; Bureau of International Cooperation Strategy, 2016).

### 1.3.2 *Internationalising HE in Thailand*

The internationalisation of HE institutions is regarded as a natural and unavoidable consequence of the continued globalisation of economies (Llego, 2014). ‘In the Asia Pacific, the internationalisation of higher education has been launched through the concept of education hubs’ (Kell and Vogl, 2012; p. 67). The concept of education hub has brought an image of an integrated relationship between education sectors, business and international students. Internationalisation brings about a “flow of knowledge and cultures across national boundaries” (Slethaug, 2007). Through internationalisation, ‘student mobility brings people from different backgrounds and cultures together on campus will result in the development of transformative cross-cultural understandings and friendships which will lead naturally to this flow of knowledge and culture’ (Leask, 2010, p. 3).

The internationalisation of HE in Thailand has been incorporated since 1990 (Lavankura, 2013). For almost 30 years the government has interpreted the policy on internationalisation differently at different times, which has affected HE policy. The internationalisation policy in Thailand has been supported and encouraged by international development organisations (ibid.). On the one hand, ‘Western practices of internationalisation and Western systems of HE remarkably influence Thai HE and the criteria for the internationalisation of those institutions’ (Llego, 2014, p. 1875). On the other hand, the government has attempted to find a ‘middle way’ to ‘catch up with the West’ to implement internationalisation while trying not to threaten the ‘indigenous’ circumstances, the embedded culture and the identity of the Thai people (Lavankura, 2013; Llego, 2014).

However, when referring to ‘international programmes’ in Thailand, it is generally understood that it refers to a curriculum which uses English as a medium of instruction (Jaroensubphayanont, 2014).

Fuelled by the official establishment of the AEC in 2015, the HE industry is growing strongly and has a high competition level (Ngamkamollert and Ruangkanjanases, 2015). In response to the creation of a Thai ‘education hub’, the Royal Thai Government has given high priority to upgrade the quality of international programmes and internationalise tertiary education in order to attract more prospective international students (Chang, 2011; Yakubb, 2015). There

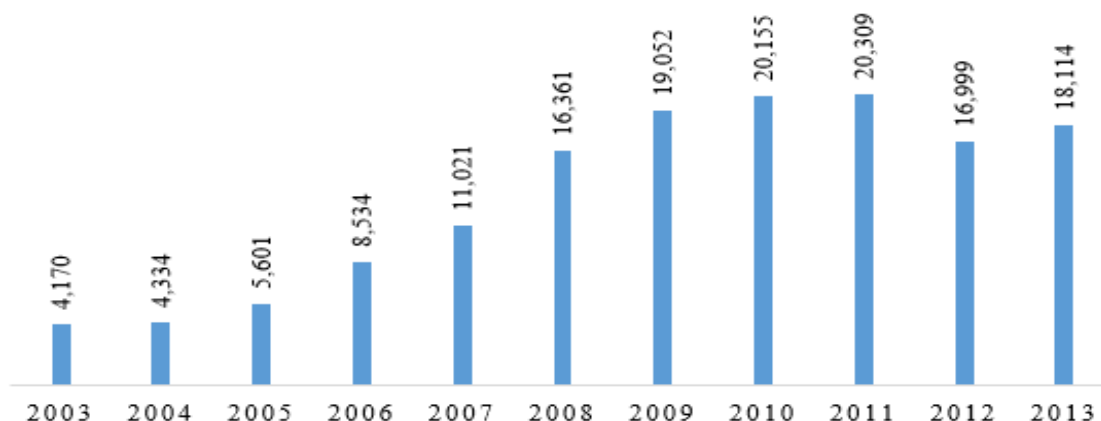
are many programmes and efforts among the ASEAN region to promote student mobility with credit transfer as part of HE harmonisation in Southeast Asia. One example is the ASEAN International Mobility Students (AIMS) programme, previously known as M-I-T (Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand) Exchange Programme. Another one is Thailand-ASEAN Exchange Programme, established since 2012 as a one-way exchange to enhance students' competencies to meet the demands of ASEAN's skilled labour market as well as to strengthen the relationships and integration of ASEAN community through education. Experts from western countries, both the US and the EU, have been invited to recommend regulated guidelines and policies of these exchange programmes (Kanjaniyot, 2014).

An increasing number of international students from among the region results in high competition of HE institutions between countries and in the country itself. HE institutions in Thailand which wish to offer international programmes should heighten the quality and standards of international programmes, aiming to meet the six aspects of international education: i.) quality and efficiency of programme administration; ii.) international standards of curriculum; iii.) qualifications and diversity of faculty members; iv.) international and cultural diversity of student bodies; v.) an international academic learning environment; and vi.) international standards of facilities and services (Chang, 2011).

In 2010, both public and private Thai HE institutions offered a total of 981 international programmes at undergraduate and graduate levels; that is, 342 undergraduate programmes, 614 graduate programmes and 25 other programmes. It was found that 699 programmes were offered by public universities and 282 were in private universities (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2011).

The next section highlights the number of international students in Thailand.

## 1.4 International Students in Thai HE Institutions



*Figure 1.2 Growth of Thailand's ISs in HE, 2003-2013*

According to Figure 1.2, the number of ISs increased from 4,170 in 2003 to 20,309 in 2011. The number of ISs rose for almost a decade and then significantly declined in the 2012. A study conducted by Llego (2014) might explain the decreasing figure of ISs in Thailand for that year. Llego mentioned Thailand's core weaknesses that affected its internationalising of HE, such as a lack of cohesion between the internationalisation in HE policy and actual policy, quality concerns related to low English language ability of many lecturers where English was a medium of instruction, and the relative cost of international education.

The latest survey on the number of ISs, conducted between 2009 and July 2013 by the Office of Higher Education reported that Thai HE estimated approximately 18,814 ISs enrolled in 105 HE institutions (Bureau of International Cooperation Strategy, 2016). There were 9,007 (47.87%) female, and 8,383 (49.31%) male students and 42 (0.22%) students who did not state their gender in the survey. When classified by age group, the biggest group of students was 17-29 year-olds, followed by 30-39, 40-49, then over 50 years old, while 2,258 did not state their age group in the survey (see Figure 1.3).

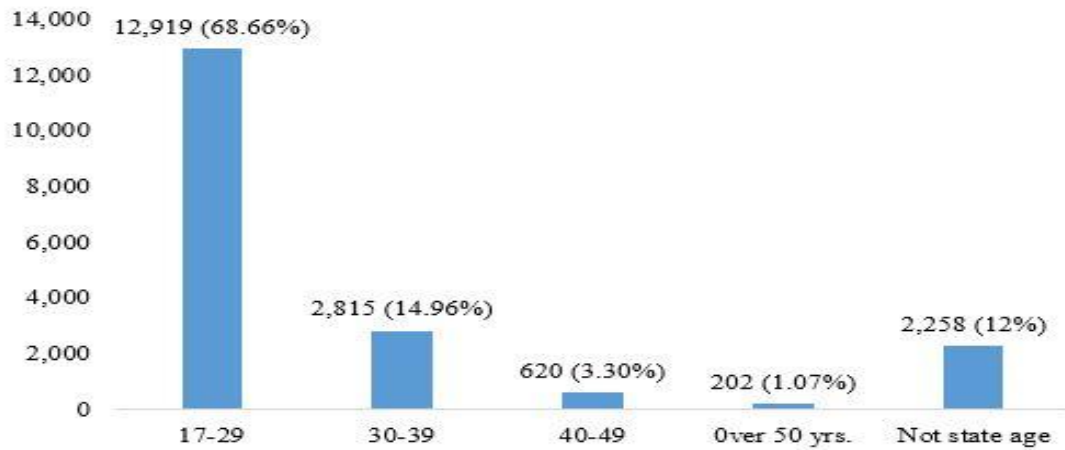


Figure 1.3 Number of ISs in Thailand Classified by Age Group, 2009-2013

Based on the survey for five consecutive years, the top three source countries of ISs to Thailand were China (6,663), Myanmar (1,610), Lao PDR (1,372), Vietnam (1,083) and Cambodia (1,018) respectively. Around 63% of ISs were from the neighbouring countries, which are all considered developing countries<sup>2</sup> in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) (see Figure 1.4).

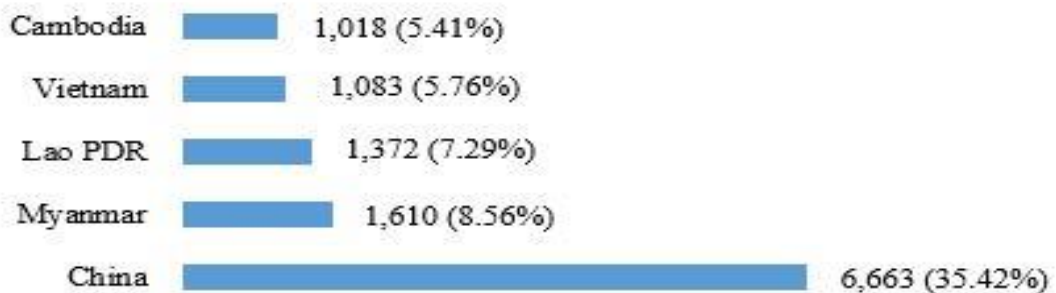


Figure 1.4 Top Five Countries of Origin of ISs in Thailand, 2009-2013

<sup>2</sup> Thailand and Vietnam were classified as developing countries by the United Nations, T.U. (2014) *World Economic Situation and Prospects 2014*. Nations, T.U. [Online]. Available at: [http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wesp/wesp\\_current/2014wesp\\_country\\_classification.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wesp/wesp_current/2014wesp_country_classification.pdf).



The following chart presents the number of ISs classified by level of study. The biggest three group of students studied on Bachelor, Master and Certificate programmes respectively.

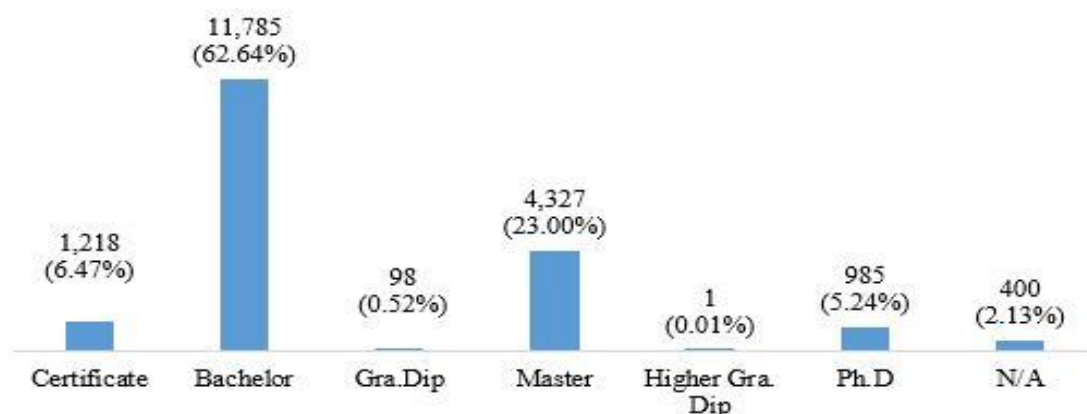


Figure 1.5 Number of ISs Classified by Level of Study

Table 1.1 presents the sources of funding and the top five biggest group of ISs who were self-funded or received Thai and overseas scholarships to study at Thai HE institutions. The biggest group of students who were self-funded hailed from China, sponsored by Thai were from Lao and overseas scholarships were students from Indonesia. ISs from Vietnam were at the third rank in self-funded, the fifth on receiving a Thai scholarship or an overseas scholarship.

No.	Self-Funding	Thai Scholarship	Overseas Scholarship
1	China (6,142)	Lao (467)	Indonesia (129)
2	Myanmar (926)	Cambodia (424)	Japan (121)
3	Vietnam (586)	Bhutan (304)	Myanmar (107)
4	USA (537)	China (272)	Cambodia (102)
5	Lao (489)	Vietnam (259)	Vietnam (92)

Table 1.1 Sources of Funding of International Students in Thailand

Figure 1.6 presents the fields of study that international students enrolled in 2009-2013. If categorising ISs enrolments based on the International Standard of Education (ISCED), most international students enrolled in two fields: Business, and Humanities and Social sciences (ibid.).

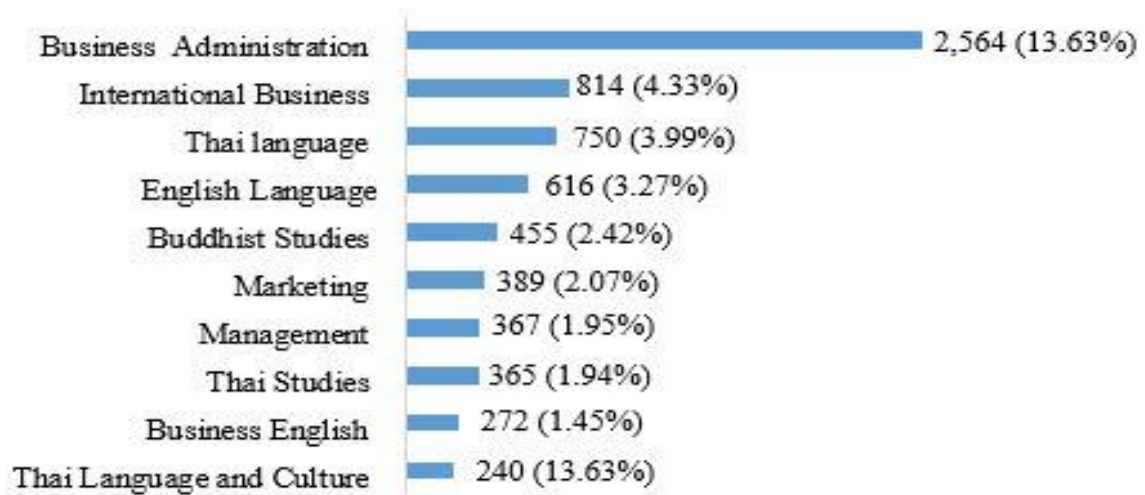


Figure 1.6 Number of ISs Classified by Field of Study

## 1.5 Key Concepts and Key Words of the Study

This section provides the definitions of key terms of the study. The words which will be defined are adjustment, psychological, sociocultural and academic adjustment, as well as related terms such as adaptation and acculturation.

### 1.5.1 *Adjustment and related terms*

Many scholars have given various definitions of the word ‘adjustment’. These definitions can be given differently according to the context in which it is employed since there are various ways to view, define and measure it. The word ‘adjustment’ is derived from the Latin word *ad-justare*, referring to a process by which one balances needs and the obstacles in his or her environment (Mesidor and Sly, 2016).

There are many terms which are closely related to the term ‘adjustment,’ such as ‘adaptation’ and ‘acculturation’. These terms seem to have a similar meaning and have been used to explain the processes undergone by immigrants and sojourners in unfamiliar cultures. In particular, the terms ‘adjustment’ and ‘adaptation’, it should be noted, are very close in meaning. According to the Oxford Dictionary<sup>3</sup>, to adjust is defined as ‘adapt or become used to a new situation’ while to adapt is defined as ‘become adjusted to new conditions’. The two definitions given imply that the two words can be used interchangeably but both definitions do not clarify what the words actually mean.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com>

However, there is an explanation that denotes the differences between the terms ‘adjustment’, ‘adaptation,’ and ‘acculturation’. It clarifies that the terms ‘adaptation’ and ‘acculturation’ seem to imply an end-state by which individuals establish and maintain relatively stable relationships with new environments, while ‘adjustment’ is a more dynamic, temporary solution to changes in the environment in an ongoing process (Kim, 2001). In this study, the terms ‘adaptation’ and ‘adjustment’ are employed since they are closely linked and seem not separable. Thus, previous studies relating the studies of ISs adaptation and adjustment are reviewed.

Adjusting to a new culture when studying or living abroad can be a challenging and stressful experience (Li and Gasser, 2005). ISs face many challenges in their academic, social and cultural experiences. Zhou *et al.* (2008) explain the term ‘adjustment’ as how ISs academically adjust to new environments and the tactics or strategies that are employed to cope with difficulties and achieve an overall ‘fit in’ between the individual and his or her new environment. Therefore, it can be concluded that adjustment concerns problem or difficulty management. Ward and Searle (1991) proposed that cross-cultural adjustment can be differentiated into two domains: psychological (emotional /affective), and sociocultural (behavioural). Based on the definition given by Zhou and her colleagues, how ISs academically and socially adjust to new environments and how they use strategies to cope with difficulties and achieve an overall ‘fit’ between themselves and environment will be explored. It seems promising and practical to conduct a quasi-longitudinal study in order to investigate the adjustment of ISs since an ongoing process should be observed over time while adaptation can be observed as an end result as in the performance of students.

### 1.5.2 *International students*

International students (ISs) in this study can be defined as “students who have chosen to travel to another country for tertiary study. They may or may not have attended some secondary or preparatory education in the country they have selected for HE but most of their previous experience will have been of other educational systems, in cultural contexts and sometimes in a language that is different (or very different) from the one in which they will now study”(Ryan and Carroll, 2005, p. 3). Also, ISs can be regarded as sojourners since sojourners refer to ones who live in a country for a limited period of time, from as little as six months to as long as five years, with a specific goal oriented purpose (Jandt, 2012, p. 291).

Sojourners can be categorised into five main groups: tourists, international students, expatriate workers, international civil servants, and military personnel (Bochner, 2006). Bochner defined overseas (or international students) as sojourners whose purpose is to study and gain professional qualifications. Their time frame in study can range from just several months in the case of language students to several years if they attend university.

In this study, ‘international students’ specifically refers to Vietnamese undergraduate students who are enrolled in a preparation course before entering their first year and the ones taking full time Bachelor degree programmes (4 years) at a Thai university. The terms ‘international students’ and ‘student sojourners’ will be used interchangeably in this study to refer to the undergraduate Vietnamese students who were the participants of this study. Cross-cultural studies have been continuously conducted in order to promote understanding of cross-cultural issues. It is claimed that “student sojourners are probably the best researched group of cross-cultural travellers, as they tend to be easily accessed as research participants” (Zhou *et al.*, 2008, p. 63).

### 1.5.3 *Home students*

‘Home students’ are students who study at university level in the country where they attended secondary school or had their prior educational experiences (Ryan and Carroll, 2005). In this study, ‘home students’ refers to Thai students who are attending a Thai university. Apart from the term ‘home students’, the words ‘domestic students’, ‘domestic fellows’, and ‘domestic peers’ are used interchangeably to refer to Thai students or the participants’ classmates who are studying at the host university where the study was conducted.

## 1.6 Aims of the Study

This empirical study aims to enhance our understanding of the experiences in adjustment of VUs in Thailand. The study seeks to obtain insiders’ perspectives on VUs’ adjustment in the psychological, sociocultural and academic domains. The study was designed to explore the following issues related to VUs’ adjustment experiences:

- To investigate psychological, socio-cultural and academic adaptation and adjustment as well as adjustment problems in the three domains in VUs’ new learning environment in Thailand;
- To explore the sources of students’ challenges and examine how VUs overcome the challenges in the three explored domains; and

- To discover how length of residence affects VUs' adjustment in the psychological, sociocultural and academic domains.

To meet these aims, the three main research questions research are formulated, accompanied by sub-questions (see Chapter 3, section 3.1).

### **1.7 Significance of the Study**

International Vietnamese undergraduate students (VUs) students and their process of adjustment in the Thai context is the focus of this study. The findings gained from this study will make a significant contribution to an understanding of ISs' adjustment process in a non-English speaking country, contributing to studies on cross-cultural research. The research approaches can be applied in conducting a study with other SE Asian student groups who study in Thailand. The findings can be used to enhance the quality of HE institutions in making policies, proactive strategies, and effective public relations in educational management. In terms of university academic management and counselling, the findings can also be used as guidelines to improve ISs services which help support the smooth transition of student sojourners.

### **1.8 Organisation of the Thesis**

This doctoral thesis is organised into eight chapters.

**Chapter1** The introduction provides an overview of the research project and the justification for conducting this research. The scope of the study has been framed through a descriptions of the aims and research questions.

**Chapter2** The literature review is devoted to the perspectives of cross-cultural research as well as theoretical approaches and prominent models of adjustment and framework of the study.

**Chapter3** The research methodology describes and justifies the methods used to collect, analyse and interpret the data.

**Chapters 4, 5 and 6** provide qualitative findings and discussions focusing on students' psychological, sociocultural and academic adjustment respectively. The chapters contain rich and original voices from students' experiences of their adjustment in the three domains as

well as their concerns and the strategies they use to cope with difficulties they were exposed to in the host environment.

**Chapter 7** discusses the findings emerged from the analysis on students' adjustment in the three domains

**Chapter 8** The conclusion presents a summary of the key findings and the overall conclusions of the thesis. It states the significant contributions as well as implications of the research. By acknowledging limitations of the study, recommendations for future research are offered in the final section.

## Chapter 2. Literature Review

This chapter aims at providing an understanding of a review, the theoretical framework and an analysis of the literature relevant to the study. The chapter comprises of four parts. First, theoretical approaches to and models of adjustment related to the study are reviewed (2.1). Second, previous studies on ISs' adjustment and adaptation related to this study are presented and discussed (2.2). Third, the literature related to contributory factors to VUs' adjustment and adaptation in this study is presented (2.3). Fourth, a number of previous studies of ISs' adaptation and adjustment are presented (2.4).

### 2.1 Models of Adjustment

In this study, the focus is on adjustments of ISs in three areas: psychological, sociocultural, and academic. Since cross-cultural adjustment is a complex process, so it would seem that one model is likely insufficient to describe it (Anderson, 1994; Kim, 2001). With regard to the theoretical framework of the study, two well-known models which describe the 'adjustment' or 'acculturation' process will be presented. They are the U-shaped curve and the ABC models. These models have been popularly adopted as frameworks for studies in cross-cultural research. Adopting these frameworks allows researchers to examine the influence of life changes (Lin *et al.*, 1979), personality (Ward and Kennedy, 1992), individual's cognitive appraisal of change (Chataway and Berry, 1989) and social support (Adelman, 1988) on outcomes of acculturation.

#### 2.1.1 *U-shaped curve model*

Lysgaard (1955) first proposed the most popular and well-known stage theory of cross-cultural adaptation: the U-shaped curve model. Based on the results gained from his retrospective study conducted with 200 Norwegian Fulbright scholars who had previously studied for different periods of time in the United States, he found that the greatest difficulties student sojourners encountered were by those who resided in the new host country six-eighteen months or culture compared to either those who had stayed abroad fewer than six months or more than 18 months. (Lysgaard, 1955, p. 55) stated:

Adjustment as a process over time seems to follow a U-shaped curve: adjustment is felt to be easy and successful to begin with then follows a 'crisis' in which one feels less well-adjusted, somewhat lonely and unhappy; finally one begins to feel better adjusted again, becoming more integrated into the foreign community.

However, Lysgaard did not offer a theoretical explanation of these findings or any statistical tests of difference of students in three different groups, a fact which has become one of the major criticisms of the model.

In 1960, anthropologist Kalvero Oberg proposed a similar account of cross-cultural adaptation in his anthropological description and elaboration. He is generally credited with introducing the term ‘culture shock’ - portraying it as “occupational disease of people who have been transplanted abroad” - to the U-shaped model with four stages of adjustment (Oberg, 1960, p. 177). The stages proposed are: ‘honeymoon stage’, ‘disenchantment’, ‘recovery’, ‘complete adjustment’. The first stage is the stage of enthusiasm, fascination or sojourner’s excitement and euphoria, i.e. a ‘honeymoon’. The second stage is the phase when negative psychological symptoms such as fear, anxiety, anger, extreme homesickness, and a feeling of helplessness can happen to sojourners while living in a foreign country. During this phase of ‘culture shock,’ individuals may experience negative physical symptoms such as excessive eating, drinking and weight gain, insomnia, etc. The process of adjustment in this pattern seems to follow a U-shaped curve adjustment. The pattern begins when one feels happy with the new environment, after which one begins to feel less adjusted, showing either or both physical or mental negative symptoms. Eventually, one begins to recover, feeling better and finally becoming more integrated into the foreign community - known as ‘mastery’. Based on stages of cross-cultural adaptation analysed by Lysgaard and Oberg, the pattern of adjustment can be graphically represented as a U-curve, as in the following figure.

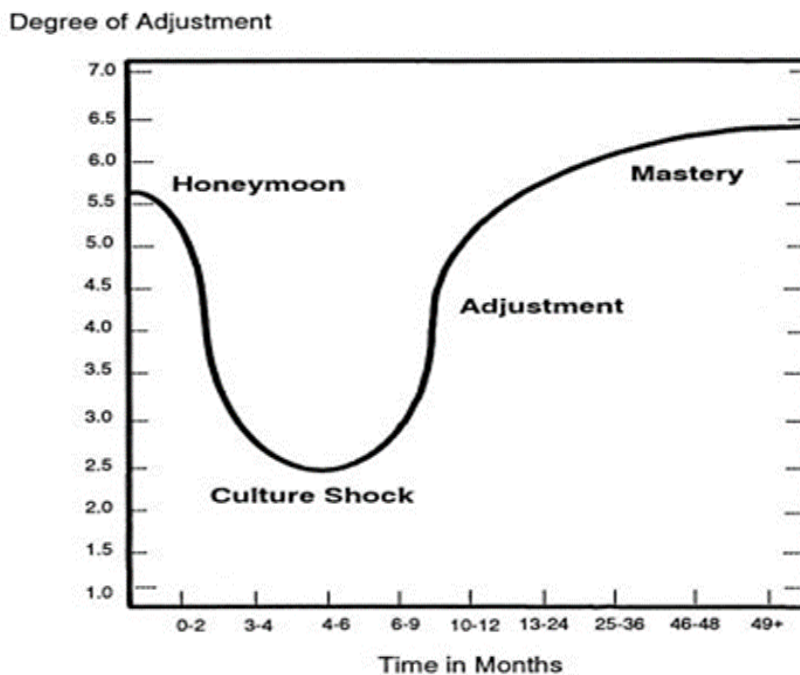


Figure 2.1 U-Shaped Curve Model



Adler (1975) extended the process of 'adjustment' to five stages. The first stage is the stage of excitement or initial 'contact,' when a sojourner feels excited and becomes aware of cultural dissimilarities. The second stage is one of confusion and disorientation, or 'disintegration'. The third stage consists of 'reintegration,' during which a sojourner has a strong rejection of the new culture and a finding of co-nationals. The fourth stage is 'autonomy' when one feels that one understands the new culture. The last stage is 'independence,' when the sojourner no longer feels alienated in a foreign culture. Although a large number of studies have adopted the U-shaped curve model to observe patterns of experiences during cross-cultural transition and predictors of sojourner adjustment, the process of adapting to a new culture and the patterns of adjustment are still controversial.

The U-curve theory has been criticised by many scholars. Several studies have proved that many sojourners' process of adjustment do not follow the stage theories of cross-cultural adjustment in the U-curve hypothesis. It is criticised as 'weak, inclusive and overgeneralized' (Church, 1982). When the model was applied to the study of ISs, a large number of studies found that students' psychological mood tended to adjust according to the academic calendar rather than follow the U-curve pattern (Golden, 1973). A study conducted by Ward et al. (1998) also found results contrary to what one would expect from the U-curve pattern. Their findings revealed that Japanese students in New Zealand endured difficulties and adjustment problems at the very beginning of their sojourn instead of appreciating the new environment (i.e. there was no 'honeymoon stage'). According to a comprehensive review of studies which have adopted the U-curve adjustment theory by Black and Mendenhall (1991), the reliability of their findings was questioned. It was found that twelve out of eighteen studies reported findings which supported the U-curve hypothesis. However, ten of these studies did not offer statistical tests of the data and there were no significant findings.

Since 'culture shock' emerged as a medical condition, it is regarded as a pathology or mental illness sojourners experience more or less in their experience of crossing cultures. However, it is widely accepted that the concept of 'culture shock' began to lay the foundation of development of cross-cultural theories and a great number of studies internationally. It is linked with sojourners' process of adjustment, so many sojourners may acknowledge a particular culture as the origin of difficulty, a factor regarded as 'acculturative stress' in Berry's acculturative theory (Berry, 2006).

A salient concept of acculturative stress was proposed by Berry (1970) as an alternative term for culture shock. Two main reasons were given as to why 'acculturative stress' should replace 'culture shock'. First, the term, 'acculturation' seems to be a more appropriate since it

gives a notion of interactions while culture connotes the concept in a mono context. Second, the notion of ‘shock’ tends to convey a solely negative meaning but ‘stress’ can be interpreted in both negative and positive ways. Thus, the term ‘stress’ gives a broader view and better matches the concept of acculturation as cultural adjustment comprising sojourners’ negative and positive experiences. Acculturative stress is defined as the experienced stress for different reasons in the process of acculturation occurring between the two cultures (Berry, 2006).

The following section presents the ABC model, another prominent but more sophisticated model adopted to investigate ISs’ adjustment in this study. This model provides contemporary and broader perspectives towards cross-cultural transition. The development of the model and its related theories are also reviewed.

### ***2.1.2 The affect-behaviour-cognition (ABC) model***

The ABC model was proposed as an alternative view to sojourners’ cross-cultural transition because it goes beyond the traditional perspectives given by culture shock, a concept which was considered too strongly linked to pathology and mental illness. Researchers were influenced by this traditional perspective. When the concept of culture shock was applied to analyse students’ adaptation problems, it limited the scope of study to the area of medicine. Ward and Kennedy (Ward and Kennedy, 2001, p. 36) commented that “the early theories applied to the study of ISs were clinically oriented and strongly related to medical models of sojourner adjustment”.

Ward *et al.* (2001) elucidated more on the experience of cross cultural transition by proposing their Affective-Behaviour-Cognitive (ABC) framework. This model was developed on the basis of Berry’s acculturation theory during the 1980s. The ABC model embraces three salient concepts: culture learning, stress and coping and social identification. They are drawn from social psychology and education rather than medicine. These three contemporary concepts focus on sojourners’ behaviour, affect and cognition, as can be seen in Figure 2.2.

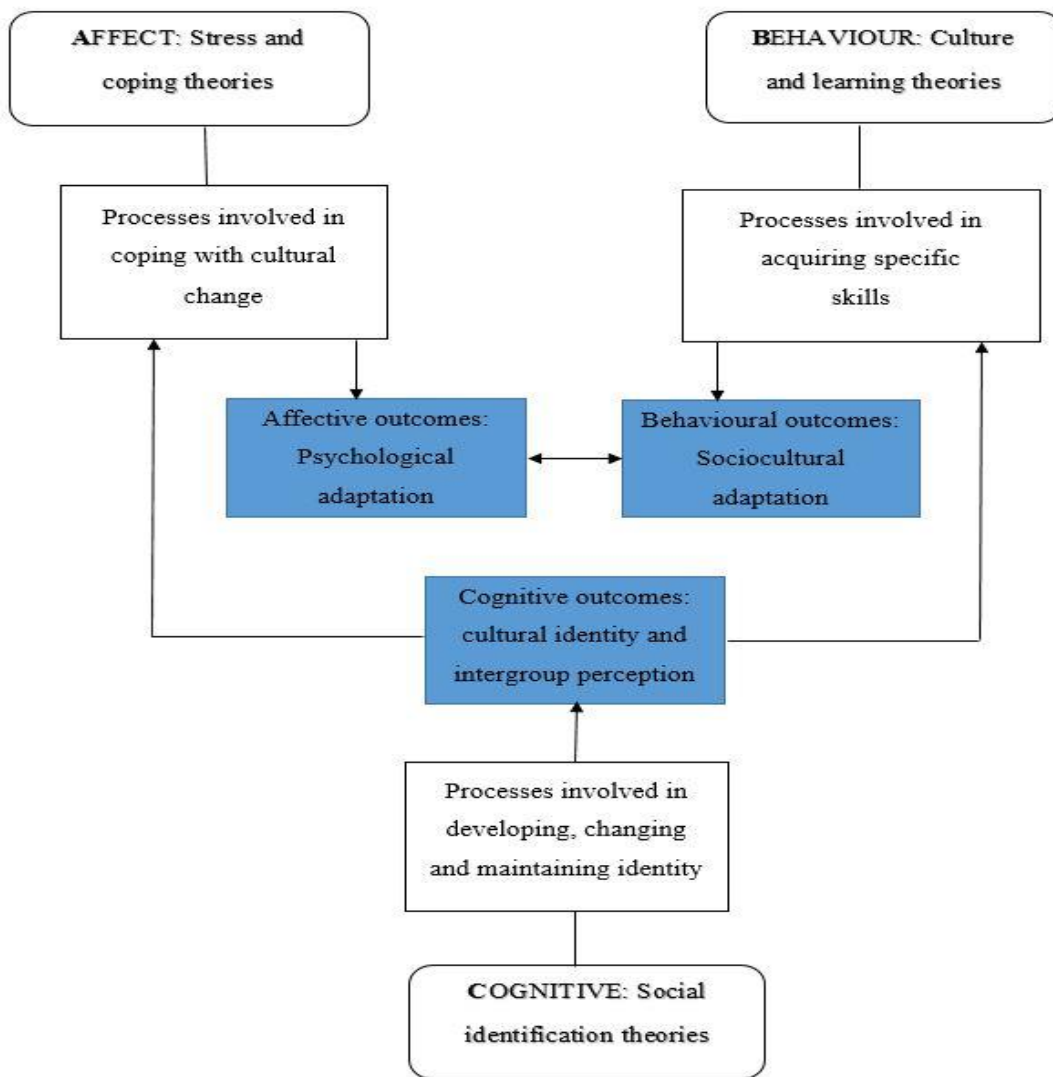


Figure 2.2 The Three Components of the ABC Model by Ward et al. (2001)

### 2.1.2.1 Stress and coping (affect)

The stress and coping approach emphasises the affective aspect, which examines the sojourner's psychological wellbeing and satisfaction in their experience of crossing cultures. The approach originated from early psychological models of the impacts of life events (e.g. Holmes and Rahe, 1967; Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). This approach conceptualises cross-cultural transition as life changes that precipitate a bout of stress. 'Shock' stems from inherently stressful life change, and so therefore a sojourner needs to select or develop effective strategies or tactics to cope with this stress (Zhou *et al.*, 2008; Yue and Le, 2012).

Adjustment is regarded as an active process of managing stress. Many scholars propose that there are a large number of variables that affect how a person copes with stress, including degree of life change (Lin *et al.*, 1979), personality factors (Ward and Kennedy, 1992) and situational factors such as social support (Adelman, 1988).

### 2.1.2.2 Culture learning (behaviour)

The culture learning concept has its roots in the social and experimental psychology of the intercultural encounter. Whereas the stress and coping approach focuses more on psychological wellbeing, the culture learning approach focuses more on the behavioural component. It argues that stress or conflicts are caused by lacking the social skills required to navigate social interactions (Argyle, 1969). Furnham and Bochner (1986) strongly advocated the culture learning model and it has become a theoretical basis for cultural training models and methods (Yue and Le, 2012). According to this concept, ‘shock’ is viewed as the stimulus for the acquisition of the culture-specific skills (e.g. knowledge about the host culture, language or cultural competence) that are required to engage in new social interactions. Therefore, to be successful in new social interactions, sojourners need to have general knowledge about the host culture and be competent in intercultural communication. Thus, practical guidelines for preparation, orientation and behavioural social skills training are recommended (Zhou *et al.*, 2008).

### 2.1.2.3 Social identification (cognition)

The third component of the ABC model, the ‘social identification theory,’ focuses on the cognitive aspect of the adjustment process of intercultural contact. The ‘social identification’ concept originated from theories of social cognition and social identity (Deaux, 1996), which studies people during their cross-cultural contact on their perceptions towards self and identity as well as how they perceive themselves and others with in-groups and out-groups. Two major approaches have been used to examine issues associated with social identification: ‘acculturation’ and ‘social identity theory’ (Phinney, 1990).

#### ○ *Acculturation and identity*

Berry’s acculturation theory proposes a conceptual approach which mainly aims to examine sojourners’ identity changes in the process of intercultural contact (Berry *et al.*, 1994; Berry, 1997). Berry’s acculturation model specifies four acculturation strategies of how people conceptualise host and home identities. These are integration, separation, assimilation and marginalisation. Integration implies that sojourners perceive themselves as highly integrated in both host and home identifications. Marginalisation, in contrast, implies that sojourners perceive themselves as lowly integrated both in host and home culture identifications. Assimilation suggests that sojourners see themselves as highly integrated in the host culture but lowly integrated in their own original identity, while separation suggests that sojourners perceive themselves as high in their home culture but low in host culture.

- *Social identity theory*

Another conceptual approach to how groups affect an individual's identity is known as 'social identity theory' (Tajfel, 1981). The concept aims to explore identity and intergroup relations in sojourners and it highlights two aspects. First, it concerns the role of social categorisation and social comparison in relation to self-esteem, coupled with in-group favouritism and out-group derogation. The second concerns the effects of specific cross-cultural diversity on group membership, perceptions and interactions (Brown *et al.*, 1992). These theoretical frameworks state three capacities identified as critical for overseas effectiveness: i) the ability to manage stress; ii) the ability to communicate effectively, and; iii) the ability to establish interpersonal relationships (Bennett, 2015).

Overall, the ABC model sheds lights on three important components of intercultural contact, and these three aspects together form a comprehensive conceptual framework of cultural adaptation (Zhou *et al.*, 2008).

## **2.2 The Adaptation and Adjustment of ISs**

This section reviews the relevant literature related to the adaptation and adjustment of ISs, highlighting in particular the studies on Asian ISs' adaptation and adjustment.

### **2.2.1 *Psychological and sociocultural adaptation and adjustment of ISs***

Adjusting to a new culture when studying or living abroad can be a challenging and stressful experience Li and Gasser (2005). Two types of cross-adjustment were firstly distinguished by Ward and colleagues (Searle and Ward, 1990; Ward and Kennedy, 1992). Searle and Ward (1990, p. 50) stated that psychological adaptation and adjustment involves "feelings of well-being and satisfaction" and sociocultural adaptation and adjustment concerns "the ability to 'fit in' and to negotiate interactive aspects of the new culture [host culture]". They added that although these two dimensions are closely related, they should be clarified and studied by using different theoretical frameworks. They also claimed that the majority of research has focused on sociocultural adjustment while relatively few studies have focused on psychological adjustment.

Under the two noted frameworks, literature on ISs' psychological and sociocultural adaptation and adjustment is further discussed below, starting with ISs' psychological adaptation and adjustment.

### 2.2.1.1 Psychological adaptation and adjustment of ISs

Searle and Ward (1990) argue that psychological adjustment is best understood within a stress and coping framework, firstly developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). The latter scholars defined coping as “constantly changing cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing and exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 141). They proposed two types of stress coping in their Transactional Stress Coping Model: problem-focused coping (or task-oriented strategies) and emotion-focused coping. Under this framework, studying abroad is regarded as a life change associated with transition which generates various stressors that must be effectively managed through coping resources. ISs’ psychological adaptation is predicted by depressive symptoms and stress-related health complaints (Hirai *et al.*, 2015). Contributory factors to psychological adjustment involve personality variables, amount of social support and life change events (Berry, 2006).

Stress and coping seem to occur throughout all an individual’s life phases (Hirsch *et al.*, 2015). Studies on ISs have found that ISs encounter a significant number of stressful situations in a new environment which emanate from the four main stressors: language barriers, academic demands, homesickness, and lack of social support (Poyrazli *et al.*, 2002). In addition to stressors in the host country, ISs are under immense pressure of expectations from families and friends in the home country (Khoo *et al.*, 1994 as cited in Chai *et al.*, 2012). The greatest psychological difficulties ISs might encounter are expected to be during the initial stage when students’ lives change in an unfamiliar environment and when they have limited stress coping strategies and social support (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Current studies have found that students’ stress and anxiety are likely to change in line with the academic calendar (Selby and Woods, 1966; Tolmie *et al.*, 2011). Studies have reported that ISs have more numerous and more severe university adjustment problems than domestic students (Mori, 2000). The literature commonly reports that ISs experience acculturative stress (Ward and Kennedy, 1993; Mori, 2000), and thus the ability to cope with stress is critically important for them.

Fritz *et al.* (2008) discovered a connection between cultural values and ISs’ level of stress and anxiety. Their study investigated stress and anxiety among students aged 17-51 at an ethnically diverse community college in Southern California, USA. The study did not discover any significant findings initially but when the participants were categorised into two groups (European and Asian students), interesting observations emerged. The findings indicated that Asian students found it harder to make friends and had more difficulties with

the language (English) when compared to European students. Moreover, it was found that Asian culture caused higher levels of stress and anxiety among Asian students. Fritz and colleagues clarified that Asian ISs perceived their problems or failure not as that of an individual, but rather as implicating their whole families, which led to them suppressing their stress. This finding concurs with previous studies on family recognition through achievement in Asian families as bringing honour to the family by achieving academically and succeeding occupationally as an important core value for Asian people (Kim et al., 2001b; Kim et al., 2005). Fritz et al.'s study also reported findings related to other domains and found that both Asian and European students experienced socially related problems while the stress of being apart from family was harder for students from European countries.

Kim et al (2001a) provided a brief review of Asian values empirically identified from the development of the Asian Value Scale (AVS) (Kim et al, 1999). These scholars argued that “culture-of-origin values plays an important role in the provision of culturally relevant and sensitive psychological services” (Kim *et al.*, 1999, p. 342). Although they termed their 14 identifications as ‘Asian values,’ most of the participants in their focus groups were Chinese American and Korean American PhD students, which seemed to reflect mainly East Asian cultures related to Confucian values<sup>4</sup> and less South or Southeast Asian culture.

Asian values have been identified extensively to explain the findings from several studies which explore why Asian students have a tendency to avoid addressing their difficulties and mental health concerns in a new culture and do not speak to psychologists as much as other nationalities do (Brislin, 2000; Mori, 2000). Among the 14 Asian values identified by Kim et al, several are directly linked and have an effect on how Asians deal with stress, as clearly noted in the following quotes. For example, an ability to resolve psychological problems was referred to thus: “One should overcome distress by oneself; asking others for psychological help is a sign of weakness”. Under the values ‘self-control and restraint,’ it was stated: “The ability to control emotion is a sign of strength” (Kim *et al.*, 2001a, pp. 575-578). Ra (2014) noted that previous research mostly highlighted that Asian students were more stressful than western students when they were studying in western universities. However, it is not clear what stress coping strategies they generally employ. Ra proposed that certain factors, such as race, ethnicity and cultural background can influence an individual to employ different types of coping strategies. Therefore, more “research is required regarding which types of coping

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<sup>4</sup> Countries with a Confucian heritage value include China, Vietnam, Singapore, Korea and Japan (Phoung-Mai *et al.*, 2005).

strategies are commonly used by Asian international students in stressful situations” (Ra and Trusty, 2015, p. 321).

As noted, studies show that students from different backgrounds employ different coping strategies. A study conducted by Chai *et al.* (2012) with 679 students in New Zealand (of whom 70% were Asian) found that students from different cultural backgrounds employed different strategies to cope with acculturative stress. Asian students preferred to use religious coping strategies to deal with stress more than did their European counterparts. Asian students’ use of religious coping strategies was considered effective in improving their psychological adjustment and quality of life (*ibid.*). Similar findings were garnered in a study recently conducted in a Malaysian university. ISs who are Buddhists reported religious preaching of the Buddha as a stress coping strategy that helped them overcome their academic tension (Sam *et al.*, 2013b). This is in contrast to the findings reported by Sapraviciute *et al.* (2012) that depressive symptoms were not connected with religious coping strategies, either in domestic or ISs.

A large number of studies have found that social networks and social support are also critical factors in coping with stress, especially for those who are challenged by more heightened cross-cultural experiences (Bertram *et al.*, 2014). Social support is thought to act as a buffer against the psychological effects of stress (Lee and Ciftci, 2014). One study reported that students who had higher social support also had higher levels of coping ability when they encountered stress (Coffman and Gilligan, 2002).

The next section presents the literature related to ISs’ sociocultural adaptation and adjustment.

#### 2.2.1.2 Sociocultural adaptation and adjustment of ISs

The culture learning and social skill framework is seen as a potentially useful model to study sociocultural adjustment. The model emphasises social skills and social interaction (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Under this framework, ISs’ sociocultural adaptation is measured in relation to the amount of difficulty experienced in the performance of daily tasks. A large number of variables are considered relevant for successful sociocultural adaptation, such as host language proficiency, prior cross-cultural experience, social ties and social distance (Li and Gasser, 2005; Swami, 2009; Swami *et al.*, 2010). Among these variables, the strongest predictors of sociocultural adjustment are cultural tools (e.g. language) and social relationships (Hirai *et al.*, 2015).

Sociocultural challenges include adjusting to new social customs and norms, especially if ISs are travelling to a country where the sociocultural rules are very different to that of their home country, when more confusion and stress might be expected (Ward and Masgoret, 2006).



Under the culture-learning and social skills framework, sociocultural adjustment is expected to increase rapidly within the first few months of the sojourn, before levelling off over time as students familiarise themselves with the norms and rules of the host country (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Longitudinal studies have supported the hypothesis that students report the lowest sociocultural adjustment at the very beginning of their sojourn, increasing over time, mostly within 6 months post arrival (Ward and Kennedy, 1999). However, Coles and Swami (2012) argue that the time span for ISs is not uniform and adjustment in different domains may not progress in the same rate.

Friendship networks are considered a beneficial source for ISs to enhance their sociocultural adjustment. Studies on ISs have previously found that contact with host nationals is related to successful adjustment by allowing ISs to develop local networks, understand and learn more local cultures and acquire the appropriate and necessary skills for successful integration (Li and Gasser, 2005). In 1977, Bochner *et al.* proposed three categories of friendship networks of ISs: i) co-nationals or students from one's own country; ii) host-nationals or local students who study in the country where the individual is studying; and iii) multi-nationals or ISs from other countries who are studying abroad (Bochner *et al.*, 1977). Through such networks, ISs can gain social support and share problems with fellow students. Indeed, it has been reported that sharing problem with students from their own country is a common strategy ISs use to cope with problems (Khawaja and Stallman, 2011). However, Kim (2001) proposed that having a network with co-nationals may enhance ISs' adaptation in the short term but hinder their long term adaptation because it limits students' ability to acquire linguistic and cultural knowledge (Brown, 2009).

Studies conducted in western universities report extensively that Asian students at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels have difficulties befriending domestic students. For example, research conducted by Everts and Sodjakusumah (1996) reported that the major source of problems experienced by Indonesian students in Canada revolved around interaction with the locals. The biggest problems for the students was the language, which caused them struggle to have active interaction with host nationals. Indonesian students in New Zealand admitted that it was difficult for them to make friends with New Zealand students. Different lifestyles, such as drinking habits and negative perceptions from New Zealand classmates, were also factors noted in the study as factors which made Indonesian reluctant to befriend home students Everts and Sodjakusumah (1996).

Findings from Everts and Sodjakusumah's work parallel findings found in a qualitative study conducted by Campbell and Li (2008), who investigated the learning experiences of Asian ISs in a New Zealand tertiary university. Their study was conducted with 22 undergraduate students from eight Asian countries (China, Hong Kong, Thailand, India, Cambodia, Vietnam, Indonesia and East Timor). Although the ISs had lived in New Zealand for at least one year, the study reported that most participants had difficulty making friends with home students.

Similarly, Williams and Johnson (2011) investigated the relationship between ISs and American students and reported that ISs in western countries were more likely to rely on people from the same country or from a similar background because they found it hard to befriend American students. They further proposed that ISs who made friends with American students tended to overcome acculturative stress better and performed better academically than those who did not have American friends.

A recent study at a British university sheds light on ISs' friendship networks from another perspective to understand why ISs seem to have stronger networks with co-nationals than with other groups. The study was conducted with 250 first year, full-time, postgraduate ISs. It was found that most of the participants tended to interact with and ask for help from co-nationals and shared feelings with friends or peers with similar experiences or cultural backgrounds. Even though several participants in this study revealed that they could take up available opportunities to make friends with local students and had an open attitude towards British culture, they preferred to be with people from a similar cultural background. The ISs in this study tended to pay more attention to academic than sociocultural adjustment and they aimed to be more satisfied with their academic progress than with progress in socio-cultural adjustment (Chien, 2015).

Coles and Swami (2012) studied how the host university could provide and enhance opportunities for ISs to better integrate. Their study indicated that university structures in the form of accommodation provision, course provision, student union clubs and societies could provide opportunities for ISs integration and adjustment support, especially in the early stages of their sojourn. This would seem to be a crucial concern given the findings of a recent study which indicated that there is a strong connection between ISs' sociocultural adjustment and health, with students reporting better sociocultural adjustment also reporting better health status (Swami *et al.*, 2010).

The problems arising from the different cultures encountered by the sojourners can be viewed as the effect of 'cultural distance'. The concept was first introduced by Babiker *et al.* (1980, as cited in Ward, 1996), to account for the distress experienced by sojourners during the process of acculturation. They argued that the degree of psychological adjustment depended on dissimilarities between the home and host cultures (Ward, 1996). In this concept, it has been claimed that the distance in cultures, rules, and social norms between home and host culture were significant factors that affect individuals' cultural adjustment. In other words, the closer the student cultural background is to that of the home culture, the easier the interaction and adjustment is (Mehdizadeh and Scott, 2005). In short, cultural distance can be defined as "the perceived similarities and differences between culture of origin and culture of contact" (Masgoret and Ward, 2006, p. 71).

Many studies have demonstrated that sojourners who perceive similarities between the host culture and their own home experiences seem to have higher levels of sociocultural adaptation. Furnham and Bochner (1982) conducted a research with 150 ISs in the United Kingdom. The students were sub-grouped according to country of origin: i.) the 'near' group (Northern European countries such as Denmark and Germany); ii) the 'intermediate' group (Southern European and South American countries such as Portugal and Brazil); and iii.) the 'far' group (Middle Eastern and Asian countries such as Saudi Arabia and Thailand). The data indicated that students from the 'far' group experienced more difficulties than the 'intermediate' and 'near' groups. Similar findings were concluded in a study by Ward and Kennedy (1999), which found that Malaysian students in Singapore experienced fewer difficulties than Malaysian students in New Zealand. However, a recent study conducted in Thailand reported contrary findings, reporting that ISs from western cultures presented better sociocultural adjustment to Thai culture than did Asian ISs (Rujipak, 2016).

It can be seen that various factors are used to investigate students' sociocultural adjustment, which allow a clearer understanding of this dynamic process, and especially in the context of ISs these multiple factors might play a role for successful adaptation and adjustment.

A recent study conducted to investigate factors associated with ISs' adjustment in a western university indicate that there are strong associations between ISs' academic achievements, satisfaction with life in the new environment, psychological well-being, contact with non-nationals, including hosts, and language proficiency. Moreover, the study also drew a link between adaptation and academic performance, with the better settled students performing better academically (Young *et al.*, 2013).

The literature has suggested that ISs' psychological and sociocultural adjustment are closely interlinked. However, research has indicated that academic adjustment seems to have a stronger influence on ISs' psychological and sociocultural adjustment since achieving academic success is the main goal of ISs' sojourns (Chien, 2015).

The next section overviews the relevant literature related to ISs' academic adaptation and adjustment, which is the third main focus of this study.

### 2.2.2 *Academic adaptation and adjustment of ISs*

Academic adjustment, as defined here, refers to a degree of VUs' success coping with the academic requirements and challenges at the host Thai university, which includes teaching learning approaches, academic assessment procedure and relationships between local classmates and the university staff as well as satisfaction with the academic environment (Ryan, 2005; Valka, 2015).

Academic adjustment in this study was observed through how students adjusted to the 'academic culture' of the host university, which includes cultural norms, the systems of beliefs, expectations, and cultural practices about how to perform academically (Jin and Cortazzi, 1996). A study conducted by Rienties *et al.* (2011) suggested that students who succeed in academic adjustment tended to get better study results and lead to better 'academic achievement'. The term 'academic achievement' refers to evidence of learning which can be measured by successful completion of course requirements such as the GPA (Andrade, 2006).

Academic objectives and goals distinguish students from other international sojourners such as business people or volunteers since ISs sojourn for the specific aim of obtaining a degree. Thus, academic performance is a significant component of ISs' cross-cultural adaptation (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Indeed, academic adjustment seems to be the most significant component of students' adjustment as Chien (2015, p. 730), stated:

Academic adjustment is usually unavoidable and generally exerts stronger influences than socio-cultural adjustment because academic studies play a central role in students' overseas education.

Chen and Chen (2009) noted that even though academic systems are similar across cultures, they are not completely identical, so ISs are forced to change and adjust once they enter a new academic system. Evidence found from a study conducted by Tsang (2001) indicated that mainland Chinese academics and Chinese students from mainland China still needed to adjust to the host institutional environments in Singapore even though their home and host countries are close in cultural norms.

Studies suggest that ISs encounter problems arising from the differences in the language used in intercultural and interpersonal communication, and the greater the cultural distance, the more difficulties encountered by the sojourners in the new environment (Ward *et al.*, 2001). Ridley (2004, p. 91) highlighted the differences and importance of ISs' cultural and language backgrounds that affect ISs' adjustment and stressed that ISs experience more difficulties in academic adjustment if their home cultural and language backgrounds are greatly different from the host culture:

The discourses of academic disciplines in higher education can be confusing and mysterious for those who are new to university study. The confusion can be particularly greater for students coming from cultural and language backgrounds that are different to those underpinning the dominant ideologies of higher education institutions.

In most universities, ISs are expected to handle the same academic demands as domestic students, so ISs face several academic concerns, including different teaching and learning approaches and different assessment systems (Rienties *et al.*, 2011; Valka, 2015).

ISs' learning revolves around intercultural communication. ISs come from different cultural backgrounds so when they enter a new academic environment they also "use the specific framework of their cultures to interpret and assess people's words, actions and academic performance" (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997, pp. 79-77). Cortazzi and Jin proposed that culture infuses learning. Cortazzi and Jin gave an example of academic culture gaps between the expectations of British university staff and ISs and these gaps might influence the process of ISs' academic adjustment. They found that British tutors may expect active involvement from students but Chinese prefer to listen to the lecturer, whom they deem as an 'expert.' They termed the word 'culture of learning' and clarified that it involves the norms, values and expectations of lecturers and learners relative to classroom activity. It is about how to learn, how to teach and how the culture of learning can vary from culture to culture.

A qualitative study conducted by Campbell and Li (2008) reported challenging issues in teaching Asian students in New Zealand which resulted from mismatches in cultures of learning. The study found that Asian ISs experienced cultural values and classroom norms as totally different from those in the host country and experienced difficulties in academic adjustment. For example, a Chinese student reported that she struggled to interact with lecturers and classmates. She expected the lecturers to behave like her Chinese teachers in China, who played a parental role and always pushed her to study. She wanted to engage with lecturers on her own initiative but did not dare to do so because her own cultural knowledge about the hierarchical powers of teachers held her back. This student blamed herself for not

being courageous enough to approach her lecturers. Another student found the classroom interaction unfamiliar; this student reported that the lecturers *rarely* taught their students ‘*how to study*’, and as a result students had to struggle and rely on themselves in a ‘sink or swim’ situation. The same student stated that he lacked a sense of belonging at the university because students just came over, studied, and never got a chance to know one another. As can be seen from these examples, Asian students often encountered difficulties when experiencing different academic disciplinary systems, which may bring a sense of ‘study shock’ (Hung and Hyun, 2010, p. 342). One of the aims of this study is to explore just how students adjust to a new learning environment and what strategies they employ to overcome academic distance.

### **2.3 Factors Affecting Students’ Adaptation and Adjustment**

In this section, the literature related to the factors - language ability and intercultural competence - often used to determine students’ processes in psychological, sociocultural and academic adaptation will be reviewed. The literature on length of stay<sup>5</sup> is also reviewed.

#### **2.3.1 *Language ability***

Many studies have identified that the language barrier is one of the most critical factors affecting ISs’ adjustment, especially *academic* adjustment (Ku *et al.*, 2008). Chen (1999) argued that ‘second language anxiety’ is a stressor that interacts with other stressors in both the academic and sociocultural domains. In the academic domain, having a command of the host country’s language increased academic success (Wardlow, 1999) and the academic adjustment levels of ISs (Li *et al.*, 2010).

Studies have revealed that ISs studying in a second language in a new country face a significant challenge since language barriers can negatively impact on the learning process, including writing of assignments, understanding lectures and the ability to express one’s thoughts and discussions in the classrooms (Chen, 1999; Mori, 2000).

These learning difficulties stem from adjusting to a new language and compound the problems ISs face adjusting to a new educational system (Smith and Khawaja, 2011). A recent study conducted at a university in Malaysia with 17 Asian ISs (six Cambodian, four Laotian, two Myanmar, and five Vietnamese postgraduate students) reported that the most

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<sup>5</sup> Length of stay and length of residence are used interchangeably throughout this study.

difficult problem in terms of academic adjustment was English language difficulties in the new learning environment (Sam *et al.*, 2013a).

In the sociocultural domain, the language of the host country is not only important for academic adjustment since it is the language of instruction but is also the language of communication with the necessary institutions in the host country (e.g., dormitory, hospital and municipality etc.) for sustaining socialisation and life (Cura and Isik, 2016). On addition to academic language, ISs need to acquire social language as well (Alsahafi and Shin, 2017). Lewthwaite (1996) found that some ISs may have a sufficient level of academic language, which enhances their academic adjustment and achievement, but they may avoid social interaction due to a sense that they lack the social language. This is in line with a study by Trice (2007), which found that ISs' insufficient language skills caused them to isolate themselves from host country citizens. A study conducted with Chinese students in Thailand reported that the Thai language was one of the biggest challenges in students' socio-cultural adaptation (Zhiyuan *et al.*, 2012).

### 2.3.2 *Intercultural competence*

Intercultural competence<sup>6</sup> (IC) is defined as “a complex of abilities needed to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself” (Fantini and Tirmizi, 2006, p. 12).

In this study, the *Multicultural Personality Questionnaire* (MPQ) was employed as a guideline to construct questions to assess students' IC through the interviews. The MPQ questionnaire was developed according to the theory of multicultural personality (Van Der Zee and Van Oudenhoven, 2000) which focused on the multicultural effectiveness and adjustment of international employees. The original version of MPQ comprises the 91-item measurement values proposed by Van Der Zee and Van Oudenhoven (2000, 2001), which includes five distinct dimensions that are of relevance to intercultural success: i.) Cultural Empathy (CE); ii.) Flexibility (FL); iii.) Social Initiative (SI); iv.) Emotional Stability (ES), and; v.) Open-Mindedness (OM).

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<sup>6</sup> IC is also often used interchangeably with “intercultural sensitivity” or “intercultural communicative competence” even though these two terms focus specifically on the communication and linguistic awareness aspects of intercultural competence (Krajewski, 2011, p. 12).

Studies on multicultural personality purport that the five traits identified above are indeed predictive of positive adjustment across diverse samples with high reliability coefficients, typically ranged between .70 and .90 (see Brown and Lent, 2008, for a review). For example, in a study conducted among a sample of expatriates in Taiwan, the MPQ could effectively predict various factors of adjustment on a personal (e.g. psychological wellbeing), professional (job satisfaction), and social (social support peers) level (Van der Zee *et al.*, 2003).

The first longitudinal study which employed the MPQ at two time stages with an ISs sample was recently conducted at a British university (Schartner, 2016). The study revealed that after nine months of study in the UK, participants' mean scores for ES showed a significant increase while CE and OM dropped significantly and there was not any statistical significance found in SI and FL. Schartner explained that the drop of CE and OM could be attributable to the students overestimating their CE and OM at the start of the sojourn; nine months later they were able to reflect on their experiences and provide a more accurate self-rating. Another reason Schartner argued was that the decrease of CE and OM might be due to the students' underestimation on rating-behaviour. A large proportion of the respondents in this study were from East Asian students, and people from these countries tend to underestimate their abilities and self-regard is said to be relatively low (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Heine *et al.*, 1999 as cited in Schartner, 2016).

In this study, a short form version of the MPQ was employed instead of the long version. The scale of the 40-item version was proved "reliable and also evidenced high correlation to the original MPQ long scales" (Van der Zee *et al.*, 2013). The short version of MPQ was used as a guideline in constructing questions to obtain qualitative data concerning students' processes of adjustment.

### 2.3.3 *Length of stay*

Length of stay is considered a factor that affects students' adjustment. Previous studies have revealed that a greater length of stay in the host country is associated with psychological distress (Wilton and Constantine, 2003). Relatedly, findings in Ayoob *et al.*'s (2011) study indicated that Kashmiri students who studied in central India for less than a year and to up to 3 years experienced greater health problems (e.g. anxiety and insomnia) and acculturative stress (e.g. social dysfunction and severe depression) than those who had a longer duration of stay. Similar findings were reported in a recent study conducted in Thailand by Vergara *et al.*



(2010), concluding that ISs who had spent fewer than three months in Thailand reported higher acculturative stress than those who stayed in the host country for more than three months. Vergara and colleagues confirmed that length of stay was associated with low levels of acculturative stress.

Since this empirical study was conducted in Thailand, the literature related to ISs' adjustment in Thailand is presented in the next section.

#### **2.4 Previous Studies on ISs' Adaptation and Adjustment in Thailand**

A total of six recent studies have been conducted on ISs in Thailand. From these studies, two investigated psychological and sociocultural adjustment of students (Zhiyuan *et al.*, 2012; Rujipak and Limprasert, 2016); three focused on psychological adjustment (Vergara *et al.*, 2010; Charoenrook and Euamornvanich, 2014; Lin and Kingminghae, 2014) and one focused on sociocultural adjustment (Rhein, 2016). Three of the studies were conducted with Chinese students (Zhiyuan *et al.*, 2012; Charoenrook and Euamornvanich, 2014; Lin and Kingminghae, 2014), two with ISs (Vergara *et al.*, 2010; Rujipak and Limprasert, 2016) and one with Burmese students (Rhein, 2016).

The six studies are presented in Table 2.1.

	<b>Authors</b>	<b>Research titles</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>Research Design and Data Collection Technique(s)</b>	<b>Domain (s) of Adaptation /Adjustment focused: Psychological/ Sociocultural/ Academic</b>
<b>1</b>	Zhiyuan <i>et al.</i> (2012)	A study of cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese students in Thailand: Case study Burapha University	Chinese students studying at Burapha university (N=257)	quantitative: questionnaire survey; qualitative: interview and field observation	psychological and sociocultural adaptation
<b>2</b>	Vergara <i>et al.</i> (2010)	Emotional intelligence, coping responses, and length of stay ad correlates of acculturative stress among ISs in Thailand	ISs undertaking undergraduate level (N=216)	quantitative: questionnaire survey	psychological: coping responses related length of stay
<b>2</b>	Charoenrook and Euamornvanich (2014)	Adjustment of Chinese Students in Dhonburi Rajabhat University	Chinese students (N=6); lecturers and university staff (N=6)	qualitative: in-depth interview, focus group, participant observation and document analysis	psychological adjustment
<b>3</b>	Lin and Kingminghae (2014)	Social support and loneliness of Chinese international students in Thailand	Chinese undergraduate students from 14 universities (N=607)	quantitative: questionnaire survey	psychological adjustment
<b>4</b>	Rujipak and Limprasert (2016)	ISs' adjustment in Thailand	ISs undertaking undergraduate and graduate studies (N=389)	quantitative: self-report questionnaire	psychological and sociocultural adjustment
<b>5</b>	Rhein (2016)	Burmese sociocultural adjustment to Thai international programmes: an analysis of the impact of historical revisionism	Burmese ISs (N=15)	qualitative: in-depth interview	sociocultural adjustment

*Table 2.1 Previous Studies on ISs' Adaptation and Adjustment in Thailand*

### 2.4.1 *Gaps in previous studies*

According to the literature and previous studies related to the field of international students' adaptation and adjustment, there are several gaps that this current study can fill.

First, a number of in-depth studies concerning ISs' adjustment have been conducted mostly in western countries (Kim *et al.*, 2001a; Andrade, 2006; Campbell and Li, 2008). The student participants in these studies were treated as a homogeneous grouping even though they hailed from different nationalities and as such they were from different cultural backgrounds.

Although the literature concerning Asian values and a homogeneous Confucian culture<sup>7</sup> can provide a certain amount of contextualisation for studies, other essential aspects such as the characteristics of each nationality and differences in cultural and socio-economic backgrounds seemed to be overlooked. When the population is classified as one homogeneous group, "differences of cultural groups are missed" (Fritz *et al.*, 2008, p. 251).

Second, relatively few studies have investigated ISs who were studying in a host country which was not too dissimilar to their own in terms of culture (McClure, 2007). Although the number of ISs who travel to study in their geographic home region has grown continuously (OECD, 2015), research conducted to investigate this phenomenon is relatively scant.

Third, most of the studies included both undergraduates and postgraduates who were studying in international programmes which used English as the medium of instruction.

Fourth, there is not any single study aimed primarily to investigate all three domains of ISs' adaptation and adjustment (psychological, sociocultural and academic).

Fifth, studies on international students' adjustment are mostly carried out in economically developed countries (Lin and Kingminghae, 2014). Scant research on international students' adjustment have been conducted in developing countries, despite the fact that an increasing number of ISs are studying in developing countries (*ibid.*). When ISs enter Thai universities, they face various challenges. Yet no research conducted with ISs who are studying on programmes in which Thai is the medium of instruction have been found. Thus, the challenges facing ISs in Thailand seem to be overlooked. Since Thailand is trying to enhance its standard of HE to welcome ISs, especially from neighbouring countries in the South East

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<sup>7</sup> In the past, Vietnam was dominated by China for a thousand years. Thus, Confucianism still retains a significant impact on Vietnamese culture, language, politics and education. See Thanh *et al.* (2015).

Asia region, where the number of students' enrolment has dramatically increased, this field of study should be explored as a way to improve the quality of education.

With these gaps in the literature on adjustment in mind, this study aims to garner insights into the "intra-Asian" dimension of adjustment, specifically to investigate the processes of VUs' psychological, sociocultural and academic adjustment in Thailand. In light of the empirical studies and theoretical frameworks noted, this study aims to fill a number of gaps in the existing research.

To achieve this purpose, the study is conducted under the following research framework (see Figure 2.3.)

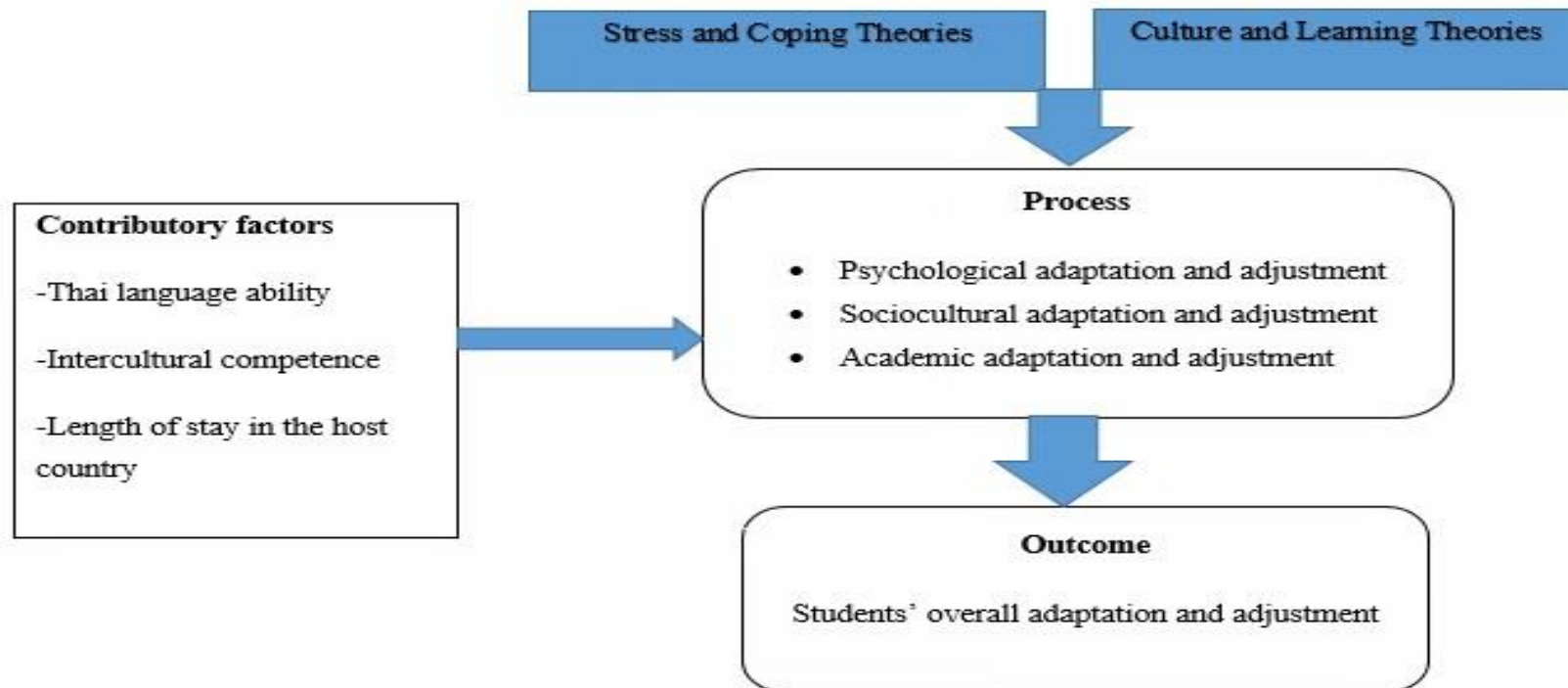


Figure 2.3 Framework of this study

## Chapter 3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological procedures adopted in this study. The chapter is divided into ten sections, which will proceed as follows. First, the aims and research questions of the current study are presented (3.1). Second, the research paradigm that underpins this study is discussed in detail (3.2). Third, research design and research strategy are elaborated (3.3). Fourth, multiple methods research and the rationale in adopting it in this research are explained (3.4). Fifth, the descriptions on research context focusing on globalisation, internationalisation, and internationalising HE in Thailand are discussed (3.5). Sixth, this section is devoted to the research participants (3.6). In the next sections, the data tools are introduced (3.7), followed by the data collection procedures (3.8). Ninth, this section focuses on the data analysis (3.9). Tenth, this section is devoted to access and ethical considerations (3.10).

### 3.1 Research Questions

The purpose of this empirical study was to investigate the process of adjustment of Vietnamese international undergraduate students (VUs) focusing on how they adjusted when studying at a HE institution in Thailand. Over six months, this research investigated three main areas: psychological, sociocultural and academic adaptation and adjustment. Adjustment is viewed as “representing a transitional process that unfolds over time as students learn to cope with the exigencies of the university environment” (Al-Sharideh and Goe, 1998, p. 701). In this study, adjustment refers to the fit between VUs and the Thai academic and sociocultural settings. Whereas psychological adjustment refers to mental health and emotional well-being, sociocultural can be regarded to the extent to which VUs can fit within new (Thai) culture and academic adjustment refers to the adjustment of VUs to the academic requirements and challenges of a Thai academic environment.

1. How do Vietnamese international undergraduate students experience the processes of psychological adjustment?
2. How do Vietnamese international undergraduate students experience the processes of sociocultural adjustment?
3. How do Vietnamese international undergraduate students experience the processes of academic adjustment at a Thai HE institution?

*Box 3.1 Main Research Questions*

This study attempted to answer three research questions which were designed to explore students' adaptation and students' processes of adjustment (see Box 3.1).

Along with the three distinct main research questions, the study also aimed to answer the following sub-questions:

- Is there a relationship between length of residence in the host country and students' adaptation and adjustment?
- What are students' challenges or difficulties in the three domains of students' adjustment?
- How do students overcome difficulties they experience in their sojourn?

### **3.2 Research Paradigm**

A research paradigm is defined as an all-encompassing system of interrelated practice and thinking that define for researchers the nature of enquiry along three components: ontology-*what is reality?* (Lichtman, 2010), epistemology-*how do you know something?* (Marsh and Furlong, 2002) and methodology-*How do go about finding out?* (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). A paradigm is defined in short as a 'basic set of beliefs that guides action' (Guba, 1990, p. 17).

For more than a century, social science research has been influenced by two main existing paradigms. One is the paradigm that is rooted in the physical sciences, known as a systematic, scientific or positivist approach. The opposing paradigm has come to be known as a qualitative, constructive, ethnographic, ecological or naturalistic approach (Kumar, 2005). This study has employed qualitative approaches to probe and analyse the qualitative data gained from multi-phases data collection. The underlining philosophy of this paradigm is known as 'constructivism', which is closely linked to 'interpretivism' in terms of epistemology (Gray, 2013) which is the philosophical paradigm and underpinning this study.

### **3.3 Interpretivism**

In the following sections, a precise definition of interpretivism and the rationale for adopting it as the paradigm of this study will be provided.

#### **3.3.1 *What is interpretivism?***

Interpretivism, or the interpretive research paradigm, is concerned with 'human understanding, interpretation, intersubjectivity, [and], lived truth' (Earnest, 1994, p. 24). It is

also known as ‘naturalistic’ (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), or ‘qualitative’ or ‘constructivist’ (Robson, 2002; Gall, 2007). Interpretivism is described as ‘the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in nature settings in order to arrive at understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds’ (Neuman, 2013, pp. 101-102).

This research was positioned in the interpretive paradigm since the aim was to explore VUs’ experiences (reality) when adjusting to the Thai context. The study also aimed to provide an in-depth data and a detailed account of the processes of students’ adjustment. It can also be regarded as a qualitative research which allows the researcher to view social phenomena holistically, fundamentally interpretive (Creswell, 2013), qualitative research is concerned with people’s knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs (Creswell, 2003 as cited in Hossain, 2011). This research paradigm allows the researcher to make an interpretation of the data collected from the research participants (Hossain, 2011) (as ethical considerations are crucial in this kind of research a discussion of this issue is provided in section 3.9).

The above outline of the interpretivist paradigm adopted for this research is summarised in Table 3.1.

<b>Approach</b>	<b>Interpretivism</b>
<b>Ontology</b>	varies according to individuals/ socially constructed
<b>Epistemology</b>	-gained through understanding the meaning of the process; understood through ‘perceived’ knowledge/subjective interpretation
<b>Methodology</b>	-understanding and interpretation
Focus of the research	
.....	.....
Researcher’s role	-accept influences from external experience -want to experience what they are exposed to
.....	.....
Technique(s) used by researcher	-primarily non-quantitative -semi-structured interviews -focused-group

*Table 3.1 Three Components in the Nature of Enquiry of this Study*

(Adapted from Carson et al., 2001)



### 3.3.2 Research strategy and research design

The Figure 3.1 presents the interconnections of interpretivism (the philosophical paradigm of the study), including the multi-method strategies of inquiry and the research methods. In this study, the qualitative data is collected in multi phases by using two qualitative approaches: semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews.

According to the research design presented, this study is considered a ‘multiple- methods research,’ as illustrated in Figure 3.1.

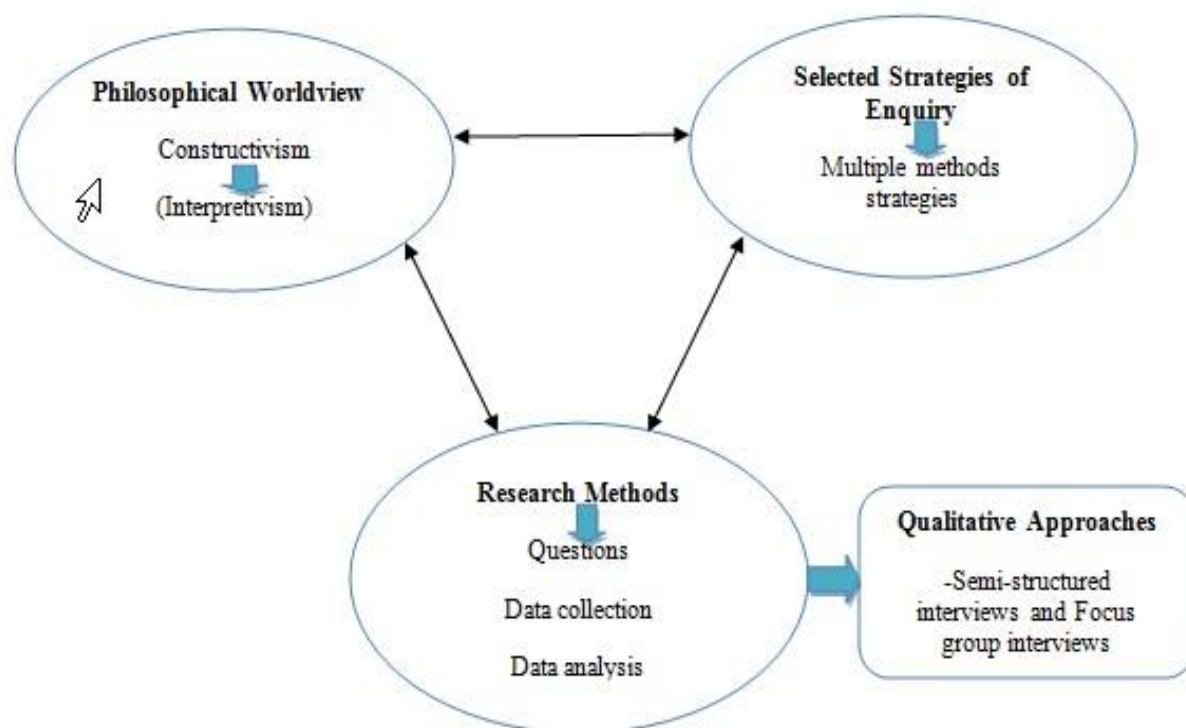
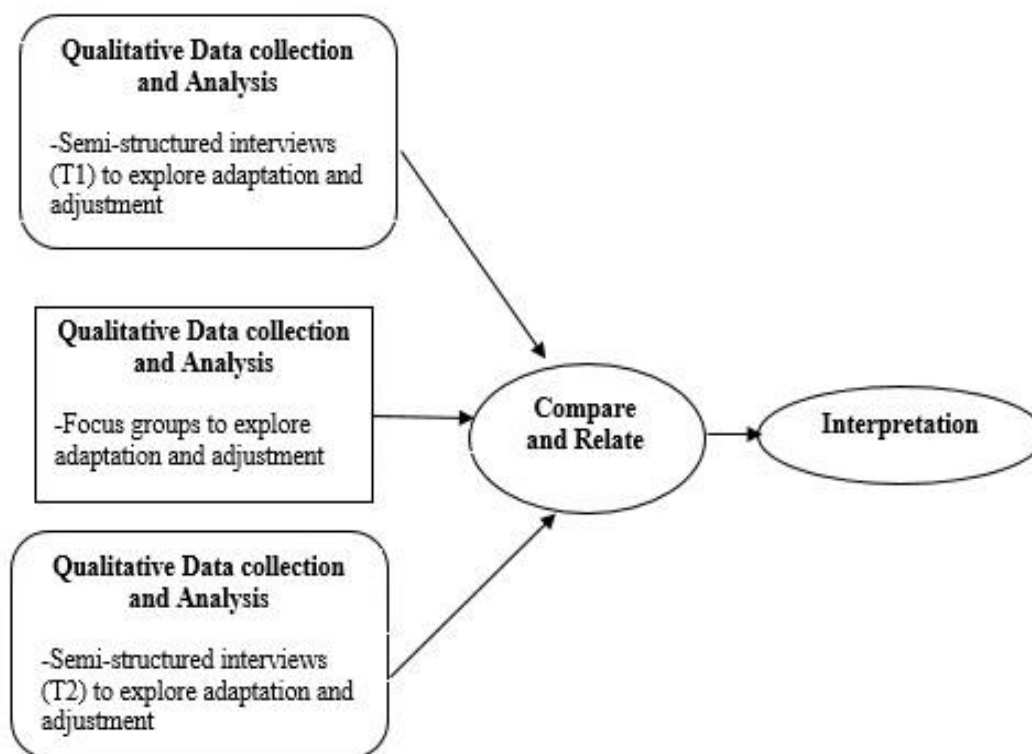


Figure 3.1 The Interconnection of Worldviews (underlying epistemology), Strategies of Inquiry, and Research Method of this Study (Creswell, 2003)

### 3.4 Rationale for Adopting an Interpretivist Position and Qualitative Approaches in this Study

The aim of the study was to explore VUs’ process of adjustment and to provide a detailed account of their adjustment. In contrast to the positivist approach, which has been roundly and broadly criticised for not providing the thick or in-depth data which is crucial in social science research, interpretivism seeks to provide a deeper exploration of the data. Under interpretivism, the qualitative approaches (focus group and semi-structured interviews) are conducted. Reality was regarded as subjective and multiple; the researcher could interact with what was being researched (Creswell, 1994).

In this study, the qualitative approach was utilised through semi-structured interviews and focus groups to gain richer and deeper data. A major strength of this approach is it allows data to arise naturally. Utilising this approach to the study leads researchers to obtain in-depth data from individuals' views, which leads to a better understanding of studies which relate human behaviour or social phenomenon (ibid). Employing multiple qualitative methods enables the researcher to increase the validity and reliability of the data. The data gained from different sources can be triangulated and can be used to build a coherent justification for themes. As Creswell (2014, p. 201) stated, "If themes are established based on converging several sources of data or perspectives from participants, then this process can be claimed as adding to the validity of the study." The data collection was conducted in three phases with multiple methods, as shown in Figure 3.2.



*Figure 3.2 Type of Research Design: Multiple Methods Research*

Like other paradigms, interpretivism has strengths and shortcomings. This approach has been criticised by scholars due to the potential for researchers to become involved in interpreting the data such that researcher bias can affect the processes of data collection and analysis. This might produce a stereotype of a group or culture when interpreting a social phenomenon. The results might not be generalised and be preferably considered as a case study which fits in

only a particular situation, time and place. However, with regard to this study it is found to be practical, having more strengths than drawbacks. Therefore, it was adopted to probe answers to research questions.

### **3.5 Research Context**

This section presents background of the Rajabhat University and its internationalisation policy and support for international students where the present study was conducted.

#### **3.5.1 *The study context: A Rajabhat university***

This current study was conducted at a Rajabhat university, which is one of the oldest community universities in the northeast of Thailand. It was established in 1923. Its original name was ‘Teacher Training School in Agriculture’ and it offered a two-year certificate programme. In 1930, it was officially changed to ‘Teacher Training School for Women,’ and some years later it began to welcome male students to study in a two-year certificate programme in general subjects. It became a ‘Teacher’s Training School’ in 1958. Two years later it was upgraded to the status of ‘Teacher’s College’.

All 36 teachers colleges came under the control of the Ministry of Education (MOE) and were allowed to offer bachelor degree programmes in various fields apart from education based on the Teachers’ College Act of 1975. King Bhumibhol Adulyadej renamed ‘Rajabhat Institutes’ (Rajabhat is derived from Sanskrit, and it literally means ‘the people of the King’) to teachers’ colleges nationwide, and added his personal royal seal as the university emblem.

In 2003, a major change occurred when the Rajabhat University Act was passed and officially approved. In 2004, since then under the Commission of Higher Education, the Rajabhat institutes nationwide have enjoyed university status with a new name by having the name of the province in which it is located, followed by ‘Rajabhat university’. Currently, there are forty Rajabhat universities throughout the country. Thirty-four are located in four different regions of the country and the other six are located in Bangkok. At present, master’s and doctoral programmes are offered by many Rajabhat universities where they have designed their own curricula.

The study was conducted at a Rajabhat university which, with more than 22,000 students, approximately 500 teaching staff and 300 supporting staff, is one of the fastest growing Thai universities. The university offers five degrees in several fields ranging from associate,

bachelor, master's and doctoral degrees as well as post-graduate diplomas run by five faculties, which are the Faculty of Education, Science, Humanities and Social Sciences, General Management Sciences, and Technology. The campus is situated in the province which contains the biggest Vietnamese community in Thailand (Sophana, 2005). A large number of Vietnamese immigrants fled to Thailand during WWII, crossing Mae Khong River, which forms part of Thai-Laos border in north-eastern Thailand. These Vietnamese immigrants have become Thai citizens. There are three generations of Vietnamese migrants living in this province. The first generation still uses Vietnamese to communicate with other Vietnamese migrants, some of the second generation communicate in Vietnamese fluently but some cannot, but it is hard to find any in the third generation who still communicate in Vietnamese (they use Thai in their daily lives) (Paanchiangwong, 2011). However, across the generations, Vietnamese culture and traditions are still practiced.

### ***3.5.2 The institutional policy on internationalisation***

The host university has promoted its institutional policy on internationalisation by collaborating in projects with universities in neighbouring countries. Cooperation in the areas of research, staff and student exchanges is established between the universities and educational institutions, especially with institutions in the Indo-China region. For example, exchange programmes between the Rajabhat and several Vietnamese universities and teacher training colleges in academic cooperation have flourished since 2005. Recently, an agreement was signed between the university and a technical economic vocational school in Vietnam regarding the establishment of a centre of Thai language. The university also has a students and staff exchange programme with universities in China. Under another collaboration project with a US university, the university's doctoral students of education administration and strategies of learning management are invited to attend a three-week study course in the USA. The University Mobility in Asia and the Pacific Project (UMAPP) is another joint project, providing an opportunity to international students to participate on a four-week course at universities in Asia.

An interview with the Head of International Affairs of the university indicated that most international undergraduate students are Vietnamese students because there is a continuing active cooperation between the university and universities in Vietnam, while international students from other countries are mostly enrolled on graduate programmes. There is a visa team to provide help and support to international students.

Since majority of the programmes are delivered in the Thai language, international students are required to take a Thai preparatory course. Students are required to pass the proficiency test before the entrance examination to study in the selected programme. Only a Master's Degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) programme is offered in English.

### **3.6 Research Participants**

A report by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2011 revealed that among South-East Asian countries, Vietnam was the top origin country which sent students to study abroad, followed by Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Singapore respectively (OECD, 2013). According to a survey conducted by the Vietnamese government, the World Health Organisation, and The United Nations Children's Fund, 90 percent of Vietnamese students wanted to enrol at universities but the Vietnamese education system was unable to cope with this demand since Vietnamese HE institutions could accommodate only a fraction of those seeking admission (Maine International Trade Centre, 2015). As a result, many Vietnamese students look for educational opportunities outside their country. As noted above, ISS' adjustment in Thailand is overlooked in the existing research, so this study was conducted with this particular group of participants. Therefore, the selection of participants is criterion-based, or 'purposive' (Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002). The sample units were five groups of Vietnamese undergraduate students. Purposive sampling was chosen to gain access to the sample units because they had particular features or characteristics which enabled detailed exploration and understanding of the study's central themes (Ritchie et al., 2007, p. 78). There are a range of different approaches to purposive sampling. In this study, 'homogeneous samples' were chosen to give a detailed picture of a particular phenomenon. This approach allowed for 'detailed investigation of social process in a specified context' (Ritchie *et al.*, 2007, p. 79).

In Thailand, BA studies require four years of full-time study in most courses. To obtain a bachelor's degree, students must obtain at least 2.0 average grade point. The participants in this study were full-time Vietnamese undergraduate students ( $N=40$ ) studying at a Rajabhat university in northeast Thailand in the academic year 2014-2015. There were five groups of participants: students taking the preparatory course (Year 0), and students studying in Years 1- 4 respectively. The 1<sup>st</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> year students were from three faculties: Faculty of Management Science, Faculty of Science and Faculty of Technology.

Out of these 40 students, 10 students (two from each batch of students from Year 0 to Year 4) participated in semi-structured interviews. In the semi-structured interview, the names of the students were changed to pseudonyms. The students' names were presented as a pseudonym, followed by year group and then gender. For example, Tawan, 0M refers to a male student, named Tawan from Year 0.

The following table presents the semi-structured interviewee profile.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Year of Study</b>	<b>Accommodation</b>
<i>Tawan</i>	M	18	0	University
<i>Prachan</i>	F	19	0	University
<i>Phu</i>	M	19	1	University
<i>Aran</i>	M	20	1	University
<i>Petch</i>	M	20	2	Private
<i>Ploy</i>	F	20	2	University
<i>Boon</i>	M	22	3	University
<i>Pawana</i>	F	23	3	Private
<i>Fah</i>	F	24	4	Private
<i>Fon</i>	F	25	4	Private

*Table 3.2 Semi-Structured Interviewee Profile*

Focus groups were conducted with 5 groups of students. There were 8 students in each group. The detail on how participants were chosen for the semi-structured interview and focus groups and how these two qualitative approaches were conducted will be presented in section 3.8.3. Participation was voluntary; the students showed their consent to participate in answering the questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

In focus group discussions, there were eight volunteers from each group. They were interviewed about their adjustment in the three domains. The pseudonyms used refer to the same person in the findings presented in three different domains. Numbers 0, 1, 2, 3, 4 were used to represent students' Year Group. Students' names were changed to pseudonyms by using the capital letters A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and H, followed by *either* m (male) *or* f (female). Examples of the pseudonyms used are shown in the following table.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>References</b>
<i>0A, F</i>	Student A, female from Year 0 (Preparative course)
<i>0F, M</i>	Student F, male from Year 0 (Preparative course)
<i>1B, F</i>	Student B, female from Year 1
<i>4E, M</i>	Student E, male from Year 4

*Table 3.3 Pseudonyms Used in Focus-Groups*

### **3.7 Research Tool and Research Approaches**

This section presents the instruments and approaches employed in this research. In this study, the questions were designed to probe data in students' processes of adjustment. The questions were employed in two qualitative approaches: semi-structured interviews and focus groups.

#### **3.7.1 Research tool: the interview questions**

The semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions conducted employed the same set of questions. The three, broad questions are as follows:

1. How are you feeling these days? / How are you feeling? / Are you feeling ok?
2. How are things going socially? / How are things going for you in Thailand?
3. How are things going for your studies?

Under these three main questions, sub-questions specific to the domains of adjustment were asked to students. To investigate respondents' psychological adjustment, the sub-questions were designed following the RAND Mental Health Inventory (2012), which is a standardised test. In order to probe the respondents' well-being, the respondents were asked about the feelings they had had over the past four weeks. The sub-questions to gain more data on the respondents' sociocultural adjustment adopted some questions from the Socio-Cultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS) developed by Ward and colleagues was adopted (Ward and Searle, 1991; Ward and Kennedy, 1999; Ward and Rana-Debula, 1999). The reason for using some questions from SCAS was that it has been supported by a substantial amount of cross-sectional and longitudinal research because its scale is a reliable and valid measurement of cultural competence or behavioural adaptability in cross-cultural sojourners (Ward and

Kennedy, 1999). The questions to probe the data on students' sociocultural adjustment cover issues concerning understanding local values and culture, interacting with hosts, meeting the demands of daily life, and behaving in a culturally appropriate manner. In the area of academic adjustment, the questions were about issues related to teaching and learning, covering challenges students experienced and the strategies used to cope with problems. Sample questions can be seen in Appendix D.

### 3.7.2 *Pretesting of the interview guide*

The pretesting of the interview guide was undertaken during the first week of September 2014, which was the first semester of the academic year. The rationale for piloting was to ensure that the questions which would be employed in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were effective and practical for the process of data collection. The pilot study employing the interview questions was undertaken with 10 VUs at a different university from the host university. I informed the volunteer students about the project and asked them the distinct major research questions. Three main questions were asked to the volunteer students. The questions were asked in Thai because it was designed to approach ISs studying at a Thai university, meaning they were using the Thai language in their studies. It was assumed that the respondents would have a certain level of knowledge to understand spoken Thai since they had taken a preparatory course that required them to take a test which must be passed before commencement of tertiary level studies.

The volunteers commented that the questions were broad; it was thus appropriate that a number of follow-up questions following each major question were provided to guide them in answering the questions. I learnt from the interview pilot that apart from the research tools, the role of the researcher/interviewer was crucial in this qualitative approach. The pilot made me keenly aware of the interviewer's roles, such as gaining rapport, following Leech (2002, p. 665) recommendation that, "Without rapport, even the best-phrased questions can fall flat and elicit brief, uninformative answers." The pilot of questions prepared me to be ready and I gained more confidence for conducting the interviews with the participants of the study.

### 3.7.3 *Semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in the present study to gain access to in-depth data of VUs' psychological, sociocultural, and academic adjustment since interviews are "believed to provide a "deeper" understanding of social phenomena than would be obtained from purely quantitative methods such as questionnaire" (Gill *et al.*, 2008, p. 292). Semi-structured



interviews are organised according to a list of topics or a loosely defined series of questions; therefore, it is a reasonably flexible kind of interview. The interviewee is encouraged to talk about given themes freely (Borg, 2006). In this study, semi-structured interviews allowed key questions to be asked in the same way each time and allow probing for further information, but this probing was more limited than in unstructured, in-depth interviews (Arthur and Nazroo, 2003).

#### **3.7.4 Focus groups**

The key characteristic which distinguishes focus groups from other types such as organised discussion (Kitzinger, 1994) and collective activity (Powell et al., 1996) is that it produces insights and data through interaction between participants. The focus groups were conducted with five groups of VUs. Following the recommendation that focus groups “involve around 6-8 people who meet once for a period of an hour and a half to two hours” (Finch and Lewis, 2003, p. 173), in this present study 8 VUs participated in each group.

Focus groups were conducted in order to triangulate the data gained from the questionnaire surveys and the one-to-one interview conducted in the study, focus-groups enhanced an in-depth qualitative data. Through focus groups, respondents’ feelings, attitudes, beliefs, experiences and reactions could be drawn upon and revealed via the social gathering and the interaction in a way which would not be feasible using other methods. The experiences of VUs were explained and shared through discussion in these focus groups. The three main questions of the study stated in the semi-structured interview were focused.

It is more likely that focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional process within a group context (Morgan and Kreuger, 1993). This discussion is guided, monitored and recorded by the researcher, who takes the role of moderator or facilitator.

### **3.8 Data Collection**

#### **3.8.1 Data collection procedure**

Since the study aimed to look at ‘changes’ in the adjustment VUs, the data collection was designed to be collected in multiple phases. The semi-structured interviews were conducted twice with the same participants. The data gained from the focus group were used to triangulate and supplement the data gained from the semi-structured interviews. The data collection was conducted in three phases, shown below.



Figure 3.3 The Phases of Data Collection

This study is also regarded as a quasi-longitudinal study since it observes changes over time and the research procedures follow a longitudinal research design.

This research was conducted following the two main aims of longitudinal studies. It allowed the researcher to capture two characteristics of change: i.) within-unit change across time, and; ii.) inter-unit differences in change that can be *either* predicted *or* used for prediction (Singer and Willett, 2003; Bollen and Curran, 2006 as cited in ; Ployhart and Vandenberg, 2010). Longitudinal research, as defined by Ployhart and Vandenberg (2010), emphasises the study of change and should contain at minimum three repeated observations. In this pursuit, this study is considered a quasi-longitudinal study since the observations were conducted twice due to the limited time. However, the study seized the core characteristics of longitudinal studies noted above.

The questions used in the semi-structured interviews and focus-groups had been translated and piloted before launching (see 3.7.2). The semi-structured interviews were conducted twice.

### 3.8.2 Recruiting the participants

#### a) Year 1-Year 4 students

I had contacted the gate keepers two weeks prior to my arrival to inform the students about my research project. One of the gate keepers, a lecturer and a staff member working for the University's International Affairs, had asked his secretary to inform the VUs through the closed-group on Facebook about the study. VUs who were interested in participating could show their interest and respond at the University's International Affairs' office. The International Affairs Office is responsible for all aspects of the university's international activities.

Over the first two days of my arrival at the research setting, only five students showed up. Therefore, I consulted with the gate keepers that I should go to see the VUs in their class. In order to do that, I needed to know the students' timetable. The gate keepers helped me get all names of the VUs currently studying in the academic year as well as their timetables by printing them from the registration page of the university. Students who were studying in the same year, same major, went to the same class. I contacted the lecturers who taught the VUs to introduce myself and show the authorisation letter from the President of the University indicating that I was permitted to conduct the research before I went to the class to meet the students. Most lecturers allowed me to introduce myself about the project after class but with some classes it was done before the lecture.

I introduced myself in Thai to the VUs, informing them about the purpose of the research and providing them the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix A) as well as the Consent Form (see Appendix B). Then, I invited the participants to participate in the study.

b) Year 0 students.

I met the VUs taking the preparatory course on the induction day. This group of students were the students who had arrived in Thailand one week previously. I introduced myself in English I asked them whether I should speak Thai or English with them. They preferred English, so I introduced myself in English. An alumni Vietnamese student who had performed the role of master of ceremony on that day explained about the project in Vietnamese. I provided them the Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix A) as well as the Consent Form (see Appendix B) and I invited them to participate in the project.

### 3.8.3 *Semi-structured interviews*

The semi-structured interviews were one-by-one with each student. Each interview lasted around 20 minutes. I contacted students who showed their consent to participate in the interviews. There were 10 interviewees (two from each group of students). I informed them of the purpose of the semi-structure interviews, explaining about three key semi-structured interview questions. The interviews were conducted in a lecturer's office which a gate keeper (see more detail on gate keepers in section 3.10.1) had reserved for me to do the audio-recordings. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes. The questions were asked in Thai and the interviewees replied in Thai. With the two VUs who were taking the preparatory course, I had a professional interpreter who could speak Vietnamese to ask the interviewees questions.

The semi-structured interviews were conducted twice with the same interviewees. In the second series of semi-structured interviews, the VUs who were taking the preparatory course interviewed in Thai.

### 3.8.4 *Focus groups*

Focus groups were conducted according to the criteria set on what and how a good focus group should be conducted. They were conducted with 8 volunteers of each group of VUs and each focus group discussion lasted one hour. They were arranged at 4.00-5.00 pm. after class weekdays so every participant would be available to participate. The focus groups were conducted at a room in the University International Affairs Office, which was quiet and private. I informed them of the purpose of conducting focus groups. I started with brief ‘engagement questions’ to introduce myself to the participants and let all participants introduce themselves to one another. Then, I asked the exploration questions (the same set of semi-structured questions). I asked the questions in Thai and the students responded in Thai. The VUs who were taking a preparatory course also used Thai in their focus group discussion.

### 3.8.5 *Overview of data collected*

<b>Timeline/Data collection method</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Data Collected</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>First Data Collection</b> <i>Semi structured interviews</i> (week 5-6 of the first semester) Dates: 10-12 Sep. 2014	VUs Year 1- Year 4	about 2 hours of radio recordings	8 one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted in Thai
Dates: 30 Sep.-3 Oct 2014	VUs taking a preparative course	40 minutes of audio recordings (around 20 minutes per student)	2 one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted in Vietnamese (with a translator)

*Table 3.4 First Data Collection*

<b>Timeline /Data collection method</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Data Collected</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Second Data Collection</b> <i>Focus Groups</i> Dates: 11-12 Nov. 2014 (week 14 of the first semester)	VUs Year 1- Year 4	about 4 hours of radio recordings	focus groups with group of Year 1-Year 4 VUs (8 students in each group, conducted 1 hr. per group), conducted in Thai
23 Dec. 2014 (week 13 of preparative course)	VUs taking a preparative course	one hour of audio recording	with 8 VUs, conducted in Thai

Table 3.5 Second Data Collection

<b>Timeline/Data collection method</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Data Collected</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Third Data Collection</b> <i>Semi structured interviews</i> Dates: 27-28 Jan. 2015 (week 26 of the academic year)	VUs Year 1- Year4	about 2 hours of radio recordings  (15 minutes per student)	8 one-to-one semi-structured interviews
Date: 24 Mar. 2015 (week 26 of the preparative course)	VUs taking a preparative course	30 minutes of audio recordings (around 15 minutes per each student)	2 one-to-one semi-structured interviews conducted in Thai

Table 3.6 Third Data Collection

### 3.9 Data Analysis Procedure

Since this study employed multiple-methods research, collecting data in multi-phases from two sources, the data were analysed independently and then integrated to answer the research questions. Then the results of the two databases were compared across the dimensions. The data were analysed, it was transcribed and then grouped into themes.

### 3.9.1 *Transcribing the data*

In this study, the data was probed through semi-structured interviews and focus-groups. The interviews were audio-recorded. In order to group, analyse and report the data, it needed to be transcribed. Transcribing means “transposing the spoken word (from a tape-recording) into a text (transcription)” (Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 110). Starting from the raw data gained from the audio-recorded interviews and focus group discussions, except for the data gained from the first semi-structured interviews with the VUs taking the preparatory course (which a professional translator transcribed and translated into Thai), the data were transcribed by the researcher word by word from the audiotaped-records. The transcripts were double-checked by a lecturer from the English and Communication Department at a university located in the north-eastern region of Thailand, and also by a professional translator who is proficient in Thai and English. Subsequently, the transcriptions were presented to all participants for verification before being thematically analysed.

### 3.9.2 *Thematic analysis*

The qualitative data gained from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups were treated using a qualitative research approach called thematic analysis. This procedure allowed me to identify and report the themes in the data analysis. The VUs on the preparatory course interviewed mainly in Vietnamese with some Thai because they had only recently arrived in Thailand and had limited knowledge of the Thai language. However, in their second semi-structure interviews they spoke Thai.

In this step, the interview transcripts were read several times in order to extract the relevant information and to summarise them based on participants’ responses following the five steps of the thematic analysis procedure: 1) familiarising with the data; 2) generating initial codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) defining and naming themes, and; 5) producing the report (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Based on the data, the students’ comments on the adjustments can be grouped into four themes: positive, negative, problematizing, and neutral. Positive comments refer to students statements which included positive words, reflecting good feelings about the sojourn (e.g. ‘good,’ ‘fun,’ and ‘happy’), in contrary to negative comments reported through negative words (e.g. ‘worried,’ ‘scared,’ and ‘tired’). Problematising comments refer to students’ statements which were *neither* positive *nor* negative but conveyed meanings referring to problems or concerns in students’ adjustment. Neutral comments refer to statements which

were *neither* positive *nor* negative but provide data related to the students' processes of adjustment.

The four themes can be seen in the following examples:

<b>Positive</b>	<b>Negative</b>	<b>Problematising</b>	<b>Neutral</b>
I am <i>very happy</i> . Generally, life is <i>fun</i> . (Prachan, 0F)	I am so <i>scared</i> and <i>worried</i> every time when I will have a test or exam on the subjects that I am not keen on. I just want to go back home and hug my family. (3F, M)	I <i>don't often hang out with Thai friends</i> . Mostly, I spend time with my Vietnamese friends. (Pawana, 3F)	Since I have written exams so I have to practice my writing. (Petch, 2M)

Table 3.7 Themes Used to Analyse the Qualitative Data

### 3.9.3 Translation

Since the study was aimed at a non-English speaking population of international students from Vietnam who currently studying in Thailand, the questions were asked in Thai so the data needed to be translated from Thai to be presented in English. Thus, the raw data was in Thai (see Appendix E). The translation was conducted after the data was grouped under themes (see Section 3.9.2.). It was done for the presentation of the data in this study.

Behling and Law (2006) propose that good translation should have semantic equivalence across languages, conceptual equivalence across cultures and normative equivalence to the source survey. Semantic equivalence refers to the words and sentence structures of the translated language keeping the original meaning of the source language. Conceptual equivalence refers to the concept measured being the same across groups, even though the wording or language used to describe it may be different. Normative equivalence refers to the ability of the translated text to address social norms, or cultural considerations (such as sensitive issues specific to beliefs, religion, etc.) across cultures.

To achieve the aims in having a well-translated version in English in which provided the three equivalences, the services of two native Thais bilingual in Thai and English were employed in this project. Both of them are independent professional translators. One translator translated the source language (Thai) into the target language (English). Afterwards, the second translator - blind to the original survey - back translated the data gained from semi-structured

interview and focus-groups into the source language and compared it to the original document to check the validity of the translation.

The process of translating Vietnamese into Thai was the same as it was conducted in Thai translation. The translation staff were two Vietnamese natives. The one who translated Vietnamese into English was multilingual in English, Thai and Vietnamese, and the translator who did the back translation was bilingual in English and Vietnamese.

### **3.10 Access and Ethical Considerations**

As this study collected data from human participants, a number of ethical issues needed to be considered. I studied and followed Newcastle University' ethical guidelines in order to understand, prepare all relevant documents, and prepare myself to conduct the research properly and ethically (Newcastle University, 2017). This section will focus on the access and ethical issues related to the present study.

#### **3.10.1 *Contacting the gatekeepers***

A gate keeper is a key person with the enabling authority to facilitate access to a target group of participants. There were two gatekeepers in this study, both lecturers at the university where the research was conducted. The official letters to request support stating all relevant information, such as the purposes, procedures of the study as well as the roles of the gatekeepers, were sent to them. The gatekeepers replied with confirmation that they were willing to accept the roles of gate keepers on 13 August, 2014. When I arrived at the research setting and started to conduct the research, the gatekeepers supported me in a number of ways. They also provided me a private room to conduct one-to-one semi structured interviews as well as focus groups.

#### **3.10.2 *Gaining access***

An official letter issued by the School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, signed by the project supervisors from Newcastle University, was sent to the President of a Rajabhat university in Thailand to obtain permission to conduct the research on 12 August, 2014. The letter of authorisation to conduct research was granted on 22 August, 2014. The Dean of Postgraduate Studies at Newcastle University approved my project on 12 August 2014, and Ethical Approval was granted on 9 September, 2014.



The ethical issues related to the present study involved 1) privacy and anonymity, 2) confidentiality, and 3) informed consent (see Appendixes A and B).

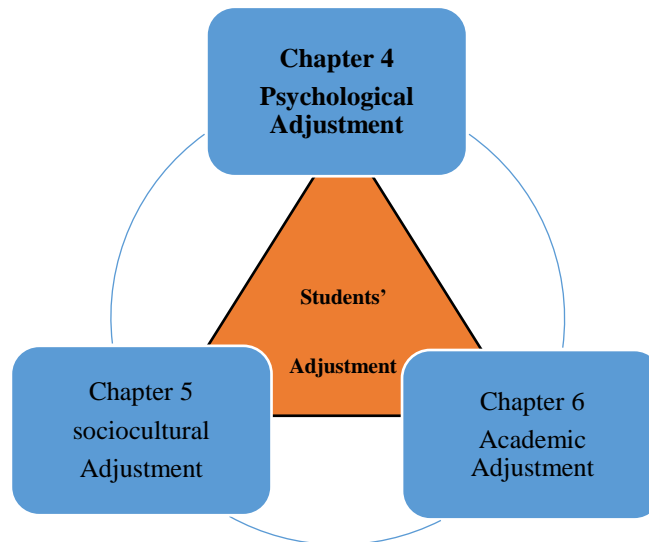
Forms of ethical protection were provided to protect the rights of the research participants. The research proposal and a consent letter were sent to the university and the participants to ask for permission. It should be noted that participation is voluntary and there is no penalty for refusing to participate. The data includes grade point average, information from the questionnaires of all participants, and audio recordings of semi-structured interviews, all of which shall be stored with the strictest of confidence. The participants were informed that the recorded data would be presented in a thesis and that they may also be presented at academic conferences or in related academic publications. All participants were given pseudonyms in the analysis and the description of the data for the purposes of ethical protection.

To conclude, the aim of this chapter was to provide the rationale for choosing interpretivism as the research paradigm and multi-method approaches in conducting this study. The research design, instruments and procedures in gaining the qualitative data, the data analyses as well as the strategies used to enhance the quality of this research along with relevant ethical considerations have been discussed.

In the next chapter, the qualitative findings which illustrate students' psychological adaptation and adjustment are presented.

## Chapter 4. Findings on the Students' Psychological Domain

This chapter presents findings regarding the qualitative data generated by semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The findings reveal students' experience of change (adjustment). The focus of the findings in this chapter is on the students' psychological domain; the other two domains—sociocultural and academic—are presented in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 respectively, as can be seen in the following figure:



*Figure 4.1 The Focus of Chapter 4: Psychological Adjustment*

All the qualitative findings in the three domains are interconnected and they result in students' overall adjustment. The qualitative data presented is aimed to answer the first main research question:

How do Vietnamese international undergraduate students experience the processes of psychological adjustment?

The qualitative analyses are also aimed to probe answers to following sub-questions:

- What are students' challenges or difficulties in the psychological domains of students' adjustment?
- How do students overcome the difficulties they experience in their sojourn?

This chapter consists of two parts. Firstly, findings obtained from two rounds of semi-structured interviews (4.1) are explored; secondly, findings gained from focus groups are presented and summarised (4.2).

#### **4.1 Findings from Semi-Structured Interviews**

The first interview round was conducted in the first weeks of the first semester (September) with students from Year 1 to Year 4. The preparative course started in the final week of September, and the interviews with students who enrolled in this course were conducted in the induction week, at the very beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> teaching week of the course.

##### **4.1.1 Interviews T1: early teaching weeks**

At T1, the majority of interviewees reported a positive orientation towards their psychological adjustment. Several interviewees from different year groups showed their positive attitudes towards the people, the host country and their studies. The use of positive words such as “relaxed”, “fun”, “fine”, “happy”, and “comfortable” were raised frequently. They mentioned that their ‘lives as international students’ were enjoyable, stating that they were satisfied with their ‘lives and studies’ in the host country, as can be seen in the following quotes:

I feel very happy. It is a lot of fun to study here. (Phu, 1M)

I am happy because I can live my life here. I enjoy studying. I feel happy even though the study is tough but it is good. I think I can do it. I can live by myself. (Petch, 2M)

Petch’s statement involved a belief or attitude called ‘self-efficacy’. It is an individual’s beliefs and capability used to manage problems or overcome difficulties (Black and Gregersen, 1991; Vidal et al., 2007).

The interviews with Year 0 students were conducted during the orientation week. At this phase, students were introduced to events and activities related to social networking, programme information or valuable advice which helped them settle into the new learning environment.

Tawan and Prachan, Year 0 students, mentioned their positive feelings towards the course, lecturers, people, and host country; these two students did not mention the difficulties in learning yet since they had entered Thailand to take the course only a week prior to the interviews:

I have been to Thailand for one month and a half. I like Thailand and Thai people very much. Thai people are kind. [...] I have known many Thai people and found that they also like me. I feel very relaxed to be here. At the very beginning, I felt the lessons were very easy and a lot of fun. (Tawan, 0M)

I think Thailand is good and Thai people are kind. I have been very happy to learn Thai language with Thai lecturers. They teach very well and help me. I have just arrived in Thailand. (Prachan, 0F)

Fah, a 4<sup>th</sup> Year student, stated that she felt “safe” since the country was “peaceful”.

Therefore, she foreplanned to work in the country after her graduation:

I feel good and safe [...] Living in Thailand is peaceful. I really like it. I plan to find a job and work in Thailand after I graduate. (Fah, 4F)

Fon, another 4<sup>th</sup> Year student, also stated that she enjoyed living in Thailand. Apart from study, she did a part-time evening job. She also expressed her aspiration to work in the country after her graduation:

[...] after study time I go to work. I love to live my life like this. (Fon, 4F)

Generally, most students reported that they were happy and psychologically well adjusted, but a number did mention ‘loneliness and homesickness,’ which were generally assumed as common concerns of international student problems in adjustment, and ones which could trigger health problems. Living apart from family could affect students’ PWB, especially for the ones who were close to their family:

Actually, being here is a bit lonely so it makes me feel a bit tired, not much. This is because my family is in Vietnam so we don’t have much time to talk to each other. (Aran, 1M)

Pawana, a 3<sup>rd</sup> Year student, said that she experienced loneliness but she also mentioned how to comfort herself:

I feel lonely and sometimes I want to go back home but I can’t. I tell myself I should study until I graduate and then I will go back home. I will be in Thailand only 5 or 6 years but I’ve been at home for 18 years already. (Pawana)

A student commented that problems in close relationships and financial hardships could cause negative feelings such as worries, stress, and difficulties. This student mentioned some peers who were worried about their expenses while he himself did not have such problem:

I don’t feel stressed because of work or love. I only study, play sports with friends. I am happy because I don’t have to think about anything much. Unlike some of my friends, who are worried about how much they should spend. They wait for their moms to send them money. I don’t have to be stressed about that. I am happy. (Boon, 3M)

As can be seen from this quote, financial hardship could be a crucial problem for international students and lead to stress. Not having such a problem, this student stated that he did not worry about anything so he could be contented in his life day-to-day life.

The findings also reveal that social support was associated with an individual's psychological wellbeing. Support from friends could help this student cope with feelings of loneliness, as shown in the following statement:

I won't feel lonely because I have a lot of Vietnamese friends and when I have problems I can consult them. I have been in Thailand for 7 days. I feel happy. (Prachan, 0F)

Some interviewees mentioned several leisure and recreation activities, such as travelling, playing sports, and going shopping, including participating in culturally specific activities such as "making merit"<sup>8</sup> or "going to Buddhist temples". Practising these religious activities, it was noted, enabled them to enjoy themselves while studying in a foreign country and could foster positive psychological adjustment:

I don't feel bored because if I have time I will travel or do whatever I want to do. I make merit, hangout with friends, go to temples, go to exercise. In my free time, I hang out with Thai friends, travelling together, go to Central, Big C, Macro department stores. (Phu, 1M)

I jog every morning. I love fresh air in the morning so I can start the day with good feelings. (Fah, 4F)

When I feel bored I just go to shopping malls, do some shopping or window shopping. (Pawana, 3F, 3F)

To sum up, the majority of participants reported positive comments on their PWB and personal life satisfaction at the beginning of the academic year. They seemed not to experience much stress during this transition. According to students' reporting, feelings of homesickness and loneliness could happen occasionally. Financial problems could provoke stress and worries for students. The interviewees had different strategies to cope with worries and stress, such as getting support from peers, forming new friendship networks among friends, lecturers, staff and locals, or engaging in recreational activities. Students' positive attitudes and thinking could help them cope with unpleasant feelings. On the whole, most interviewees presented optimistic views and positive attitudes towards learning.

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<sup>8</sup> Merit is one of the central concepts of Buddhism. Merit-making is a fundamental practice of Buddhist laymen and monks. There are many ways of making merit, such as giving, meditating, listening to Buddha's teachings, having the right beliefs, etc. (See more in Gale, T. (2005) 'Encyclopedia of Religion', *Merit: Buddhist Concepts*. Available at: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/merit-buddhist-concepts> (Accessed: 13 January 2017).

#### **4.1.2 Interviews T2: week 26 of teaching**

At T2, the interviews were conducted with the same interviewees. Students had been more than six months into their programme in this academic year. At this time, most of the interviewees seemed to be enjoying studies and lives in their journey as ‘international students’ after they had been attending their studies in the new semester for six months. All interviewees mentioned that meeting friends in class and having interaction with peers made them feel good and improved their wellbeing. ‘Social ties’ and ‘social support’ were counted as crucial factors; connecting with friends and maintaining good relationships could help during the adjustment process:

I feel delighted and happy. [...] very good fun, ‘sabai dee’<sup>9</sup>It’s a lot of fun to study and have friends. (Phu, 1M)

Everything is OK. I gained more weight. I enjoy eating with friends. I am very happy. (Pawana, 3F)

An interviewee reported that she was both physically and mentally healthy. This student said she always exercised. This student also mentioned ‘good weather’ in the host country, so she could do outdoor sports regularly:

I am fine. I am healthy because I exercise every day. I also do a part-time job and study. Exercise helps a lot to make me physically and mentally healthy. The weather is nice in Thailand. I jog around the lake two rounds every day. [...] On weekends, I’ll jog in the mornings; on weekdays I’ll do it in the afternoon before going to do my part time job. (Fah, 4F)

Students who were taking the preparative course expressed their positive feelings, frequently stating a Thai word they knew - “sanook”, which means fun. They also reported that they felt “happy” frequently in the interview.

I am very happy. Generally, life is fun. (Prachan, 0F)

That’s great fun ‘sanook’ because I have a lot of Thai friends now and I travel with them. (Tawan, 0M)

Tawan formed a relation network with local students after he had studied for several months in the host country and he spent time traveling with his Thai friends.

An interviewee from the Year 4 Group expressed a mix of feelings towards her study since she was nearly graduated:

I feel a little bit excited because it’s my final year. Actually, there’s not anything much to worry because I’m already in Year 4 and I’m near to

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<sup>9</sup>‘sabai dee’ is a Thai word literally meaning ‘fine’ in English.

graduation. I don't have to think about anything much like when I was Year 1- Year 3. Now, I am fine and healthy. (Fon, 4F)

The T2 interview was conducted around six months after the students had been through their study programmes of a new academic year. At this time, several commented on 'fatigue and worries' they were experiencing in learning. It could not be denied that various factors such as examinations, the difficulties of the study, and academic workload could affect student sojourners' wellbeing, as can be seen in the following extracts:

I feel a little bit tired because there is a lot homework. (Ploy, 2F)

I feel a little bit tired because there is a lot of group work but I don't count it as a big problem (Pawana, 3F).

I feel a bit worried. The study is tough. It's getting harder and harder. (Phu, 1M)

Actually, last two weeks. I was very tired. I was very tired because there was a lot of work. I had to attend many seminars, preparing all documents and I also had an internship. That was exhausting but now I feel relieved. (Fon, 4F)

The feeling of 'homesickness' was a common problem found in international students' adjustment and could even be provoked by many factors, even for those who had spent quite some time in the host country. Petch, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year student, said "I feel happy but I want to go back home. I miss my parents". A festive season such as Vietnamese New Year could make some students become 'nostalgic', lonely, and low in mood:

I am a little bit missing my family because it's near Chinese New Year. I miss my parents. Chinese New Year is Vietnamese New Year <sup>10</sup>. It's the festive season when family and friends gather and celebrate together. I miss the atmosphere and really want to join them. (Boon, 3M)

These two interviewees also mentioned how they coped with homesickness: "I call mom quite often" (Petch); "I always send messages and have video calls with my family regularly" (Boon). All the interviewees stressed that using technology to connect them to their families was necessary. They emphasised the importance of 'family support' so they used 'virtual' support such as Skype, Line and Messenger to give them online communication with family and friends in their home country.

To conclude, at T2 interview, negative vocabulary such as "worry", "tired", and "exhausted" were raised more often than at T1 interview since students had been on their studies for six months. This could be interpreted to mean that there was an association between students' PWB and the academic demands of the degree programme, which could cause concerns. A

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<sup>10</sup> T2 interview was conducted on 27<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> Jan, 2014, which was approaching Vietnamese New Year (31<sup>st</sup> Jan.)

change of circumstances could activate the feeling of ‘homesickness’ to any students (even those who had spent several years in the host country). All the interviewees mentioned that they used online communication tools to access ‘family support’. All agreed that ‘social ties’ and ‘social support’ were counted as crucial factors that helped to enhance their PWB. The climate of the host country was mentioned as “nice” by a student who enjoyed outdoor jogging, an activity she claimed gave her both physical and mental health benefits.

## 4.2 Findings from Focus Groups

Focus groups with five groups of students took place in the period between T1 and T2 of the semi-structured interviews. Each group consisted of eight members. In this part, data on PWB will be analysed and summarised.

Overall, the majority of comments on students’ wellbeing gained from focus groups were positive, with words such as “happy”, “relieved”, “comfortable”, “fine” and “healthy” used frequently. On the whole, most students were satisfied with their lives and studies in the new environment. Most students from the Year 0 Group reported that they were happy and enjoyed classes and learning new things:

I’m so happy to study here. (0A, F)

Today even though it is a long day I’ m ok and everyone is ok right now. It’s good because the class is fun. (0G, M)

Students from Year 1 to Year 4 groups expressed similar positive feelings towards their wellbeing:

Not any serious problems, so happy. There is only one problem I am overweight now because I enjoy eating. (1B, F)

[...] so happy because there are a lot of friends. (2A, F)

I’m happy and healthy (3F, F)

I’m happy and feel very lucky that I’ve been here for 4 years (4F, M)

A number of students also mentioned that they felt ‘welcome’ because local people were friendly and willing to help and talk to them. Therefore, they felt happy and eager to learn, not only in the classroom. Most of them reflected that they had good attitudes towards the people of the host country, as can be seen in the following extract:

The people like to help us a lot. At the dormitory, Thai students greet and want to talk to us. They teach us Thai language. When I go out to buy things at the market, the sellers try to communicate with us. I think Thai people are nice. (0G, M)



Several interviewees from the Year 4 Group mentioned positive feelings because they were nearly finished with their studies and some were planning to apply for jobs in Thailand:

I plan to apply for a job when I finish my studies because I like the country. I have got an experience as being a student here. Next, I want to gain experience in work. (4A, F)

Now, I've almost graduated. I really want to work in Thailand. (4H, M)

Overall, students from every focus group mentioned that they had 'social contact' and got support from co-nationals and host national friends. The following extract, taken from a student in Year 0, shows that friends from the host country could be a crucial source of 'social support' which could enhance ISs' wellbeing:

I am staying in a female dormitory so I have several friends. I have Vietnamese friends and my roommates are Thais. They all are kind. We go out together. We travel, eat, go shopping together. I feel warm and happy. I think it is very good to have Thai friends because I can improve and learn my Thai. (0C, F)

In my opinion, if I live in any country, I should have friends from the host country. Now, I have around 20 Thai friends. They help me a lot and we travel together. (0E, M)

I feel warm here. Thai friends are sincere to help; especially, in my study programme. (0F, M)

This study found that 'social support' coming from peers, family and host country nationals was 'essential' for maintaining the physical and psychological health of international students, a factor which was mentioned by students from every focus group. All interviewees said that they had friends and had at least one close friend and most of their close friends were co-nationals. Many students had two or three close friends.

However, the data revealed that several students mentioned that they did not have many friends but they expressed that they had 'true' and 'good' friends. Surprisingly, several mentioned that they had close friends who were host national students. They expressed that they were willing to get to know new people but it took time for them to develop and grow 'close' and 'meaningful' relationships:

I have only one close friend. She's Thai. I like her because she's helpful. (1C, F)

I have a close friend who is Thai. She is my roommate. We've been together for 3 years. She studies in different schools but she can suggest me about homework. We spend time together a lot. (3C, F)

My close friends are Thai. We travel and play football in the evening together. (4G, M)

Most students expressed that they experienced negative feelings with different degree of levels. The negative feelings such as ‘stress’, ‘homesickness’ and ‘loneliness’ could happen to students any time and the major cause of these feelings was students’ academic performance. Low scores and unsatisfactory grades could strongly trigger students to feel ‘unhappy’, ‘scared’, and ‘worried’. The data showed that there was an association between students’ wellbeing and their learning performance:

I am stressful when there is a test. I have to pass every subject because otherwise I won’t be allowed to study here. (0F, M)

I feel like food is not so delicious if I get poor scores. [...] I don’t want to talk with anyone. I feel unhappy. It takes me a few days to feel better. (2G, M)

I am so scared and worried every time when I have a test or exam on the subjects that I am not keen on. I just want to go back home and hug my family. (3F, M)

Several students mentioned strategies to cope with negative feelings. They mentioned ‘social support’ from friends, lecturers, and parents. Many mentioned the importance of ‘virtual’ communication, and several students called home right after they knew about their unsatisfactory scores:

When I feel so exhausted I just call my family. When I don’t get good scores I feel so worried so I call my mom. My dad suggests that I should hang out with Thai friends so I will know more about the language. My dad says everything will be ok. I just try more [...] I feel so relieved when I call my family. (3A, F)

When my family cheers me up, I feel a lot better (4B, F)

Many interviewees mentioned that they visited a temple or church, prayed and meditated when they felt down:

Going to Buddhist temples makes me feel calm and relaxed so I can start my new day. (2C, F)

I think everything will be alright. When I am in trouble, I pray to God and I feel better. Then, I try my best. (4A, F)

Apart from getting support from others, several students mentioned the ‘belief’ in their own abilities that they held. These students believed that they could overcome any difficult tasks or any challenges, which helped them to cope with any negative feelings they experienced in learning:

All Vietnamese students who study here can do it. I think I can also pass it [the test]. (0C, F)

Everything depends on ourselves. If we think we can do it, we will (3C, F)

‘I think every problem has a solution. Sometimes, we just wait. We should believe in ourselves’. (4B, F)

The findings also revealed that the teaching and learning environment was counted as an important factor that affected students’ wellbeing. How the class was planned and delivered was spelled out as ‘important’ by the students. A student from the preparative course commented on the course he was studying:

The course is interesting and well-planned. We start to learn from very basic things. If the task is more complex, we are assigned to work in groups. And the lecturer is very supportive. She explains everything and never feels annoyed when students ask her to explain a lot of things. So, we could finish the task. It makes us feel it’s not so difficult to learn. It’s step-by-step. (0F, M)

Most students from every focus group commented on how group work facilitated learning. Working in groups made the task achievable and reduced the feelings of ‘worry’ and ‘stress’ in completing the task. A student shared an experience when he had to work in a group with Thai students when he was a Year 1 student:

When I was in Year 1, I didn’t know much about the Thai language but I had to work in a group. It was difficult but I joined in with the group and worked with Thai friends. (3Em)

Based on the findings gained from the semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the diagram below illustrates the concerns the students voiced.

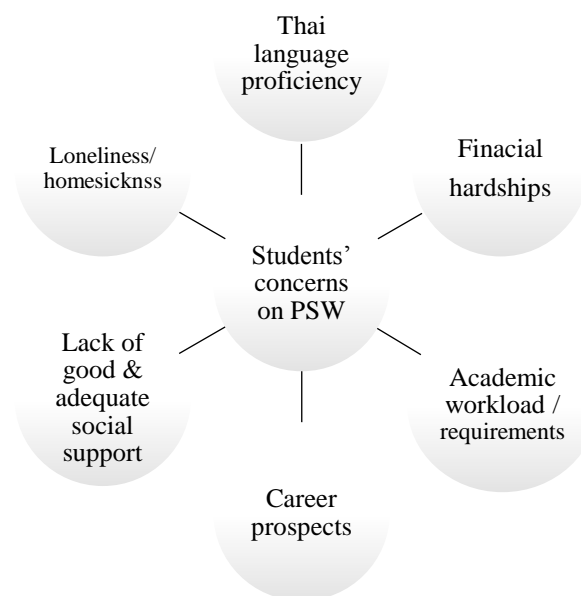
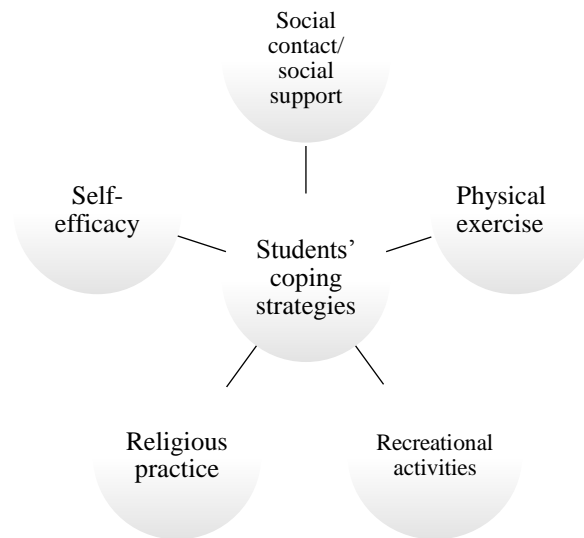


Figure 4.2 The Concerns Students Raised about PWB

The strategies and factors students adopted or used to cope with these concerns to help them maintained their PWB are illustrated in the following diagram.



*Figure 4.3 Students' Strategies and Factors Used to Cope with Concerns and Maintain PWB*

In summary, most students from every focus group seemed optimistic and satisfied with their lives and quite well-adjusted. Major concerns such as 'loneliness' and 'homesickness' were mentioned. The study found a strong link between students' wellbeing and their academic achievement. Group work was regarded as beneficial and facilitated international students to learn and work with students from the host country. The level of task difficulty could be alleviated when the task was assigned to complete in groups.

Adequate and good 'social support' was counted as a crucial factor which could help to decrease students' wellbeing problems. Support from friends, family and lecturers were the students' first source of reference.

In conclusion, this chapter has presented and discussed the qualitative findings and presented an overview of students' psychological adjustment. Data gained from focus groups supported the data gained from interviews at T1 and T2 showing that most students were optimistic and satisfied with their lives and quite well-adjusted. Findings further revealed that there is a strong link between students' psychological adjustment and the academic calendar.

Major concerns for students' PWB included poor language proficiency, homesickness, academic demands, etc. (see Figure 5.2). Students' coping strategies employed to alleviate these worries included gaining social contact and support from friends, family and lecturers, doing recreational activities and exercise, and having positive belief towards self, etc. (see

Figure 5.3). An interesting emerging data on students' coping strategy was 'making merit', a common Buddhist (and so a very culturally specific) practice which students utilised as a coping strategy.

In the next chapter, the qualitative findings on students' sociocultural adjustment will be presented.



### 5.1.1 *Interviews T1: early teaching weeks*

At T1, the interviewees from Year 0 Group had been in the host country for several days while the interviewees from the other groups had been there for a number of years. It was not surprising that students who had stayed longer in the host country gave more detailed comments in several aspects than the ones who had just arrived in the host environment since they had been exposed to more social interactions and experiences. The majority of interviewees reported positive orientation towards their host environment and their sociocultural adjustment. This was reflected by positive words or phrases which frequently appeared in students' comments, such as "not difficult", "easy", and "happy". The majority of students who had been in the country for a number of years (Year 1 to Year 4 students) mentioned that it was not difficult to socially adjust to the host environment:

I think I can adjust well. It's not difficult for me at all. (Phu, 1M)

It's not difficult to socially adjust in Thailand. It's quite easy. (Boon, 3M)

The T1 interview conducted with students from the Year 0 Group occurred in the orientation week. Thus, this Year 0 student also mentioned the activities run by the host university, which were mostly aimed at helping ISs to settle in to life in a new country and at the university. For example, students were introduced to nearby fresh markets, supermarkets and department stores so they knew where to go shopping or to buy ingredients for Vietnamese cooking:

When I just arrived here, one of the lecturers led us to nearby department stores and fresh markets so we knew where to get food. (Tawan, 0M)

With his limited command of the Thai language and not being familiar with the currency of the host country, Tawan, who had arrived in the host country only several days prior, noted the strategies he used to communicate with the sellers when going shopping:

I don't find it difficult to go shopping because I can use gestures to explain what I want. When I pay more than the price of the products, the sellers will return me the change. (Tawan, 0m)

Students who mentioned that it was "not difficult" or "easy" to adjust to the host environment were asked to elaborate more on their comments. All were students from the Year 1 to Year 4 groups who had lived in the host country for a number of years, so they could compare many aspects of the host and home environment. From the analysis, students mentioned similarities between home and host environments and these similarities helped foster their sociocultural adjustment. These included aspects which could be easily noticeable such as activities of daily living, for example using transportation, going shopping and eating. The following extracts

present some similarities students experienced in using transportation in the host and home country:

It is not difficult at all. I can get a taxi in front of the campus and just tell the taxi driver where to go. (Phu, 1M)

In Thailand, people use motorcycles like in Vietnam. I also drive a motorcycle here. (Petch, 2M)

Students learnt how to use a type of local transportation called a Songthaew<sup>11</sup>. They found it was easy to use, as seen in the following extract:

It's easy to go shopping. I just take a Songthaew in front of the campus if I want to go Lotus<sup>12</sup> and the fare is cheap. (Prachan, 0F)

A number of students made a comparison between Thai and Vietnamese food as well. Several mentioned that when time progressed, they could adjust to Thai food, which was spicier than Vietnamese food:

We also eat rice in Vietnam. Most Thai food is spicy. However, mostly I can eat it. Thai foods are tastier than Vietnamese foods. (Phu, 1M)

Thai food is a little bit spicy but I can eat it. I have rice but with Vietnamese food. (Petch, 2M)

A comment gained from a student in the Year 4 Group provided a reason why she thought it was easy to adjust to the host country:

It's easy to adjust because the way of living and eating are the same as in Vietnam. (Fon, 4F)

Similarities in more abstract aspects related to culture, such as beliefs and languages, were also mentioned. The following quote made by a 1<sup>st</sup> Year student, Phu, stated that he felt connected to the host environment through Buddhism:

I don't feel isolated or disconnected [...] In Vietnam, there is Buddhism<sup>13</sup> which is like in Thailand. (Phu, 1M)

Similarities between the Thai and Vietnamese languages were mentioned by some students. These similarities influenced students' positive attitudes towards the language of the host country and felt that it was not too difficult to learn:

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<sup>11</sup> A passenger vehicle modified from a pick-up or a larger truck, having two bench seats fixed along either side of the truck. Wongwiriya, P., Nakamura, F., Tanaka, S., Sanit, P. and Ariyoshi, R. (2015) *Proceedings of the Eastern Asia Society for Transportation Studies*.

<sup>12</sup> Lotus is used to refer to Tesco Lotus, a hypermarket chain in Thailand.

<sup>13</sup> Buddhism in Thailand is largely of the Theravada school while in Vietnam is of Mahayana school.



Both languages are the same. Both languages have the same basic structures and tones. (Ploy, 2F)

I just say it out. I don't have to think about the sentence forming. If I speak English, I have to think about word order. Thai and Vietnamese also have tones. (Boon, 3M)

The students discovered similarities in some aspects of environment (e.g. transportation system) and cultures (e.g. religious practices and languages between the home and host country). These aspects seemed to assist students in adjusting more easily, more quickly, and more effectively. The findings found are further explained and discussed under the concept of 'cultural distance' in 7.2.1.

People in the home and host country was a further topic of comparison. This student mentioned what he thought was a difference between people from the home and host country. His comment revealed his positive attitudes towards Thai people:

Thailand is the land of smiles. I see people smile everywhere. Thai people love to smile and they welcome people. I think it is different because Vietnamese don't smile to people whom they don't know while Thai people do. Thai people even smile and greet people who they don't know. (Boon, 3M)

Boon, a 3<sup>rd</sup> year student, mentioned that he could get along well with Thai friends. He further raised an interesting point in his sociocultural sojourn as his inclination seemed to adjust to be like a 'Thai' after spending more than three years in the host country:

I used to be a very hot-blooded person, very fast in making decisions. When I got to know Thai people, my habits changed. I am more cool-hearted. I think more carefully before making any decision. (Boon, 3M)

He further stated that 'people' of the host country made him felt less scared to communicate:

[...] so I don't feel scared to ask and talk to them. (Boon, 3M)

This was similar to the following comment raised by a 4<sup>th</sup> year student. She mentioned 'friendly' responses from Thai people:

Thai people try to understand what I say when I try to communicate. If there are any mistakes, they will correct them. I really like that. (Fon, 4F)

Similarly, a retrospective view gained from a 4<sup>th</sup> year student revealed that she struggled to communicate with host nationals when her ability to use the host language was limited:

In the first year, it was slightly difficult because of the language. It was difficult to understand people if I talked in Thai. I didn't even know what to say or to ask. [...] When I was in my 2<sup>nd</sup> year, I could communicate better, I could go shopping by myself. It's easy. (Fon, 4F)

Several students struggled to understand the ‘Isaan’ dialect, the language used by locals:

I don’t understand Isaan dialect. I don’t understand Isaan people. I have to ask my friends to explain what people say. (Pawana, 3F)

Problematising comments were primarily related to students’ Thai language proficiency. Some students who were less proficient in the language found it problematic when they interacted with host nationals. Some avoided contact with Thai people:

I don’t often talk to Thai people because my Thai is not good. (Prachan, 0F)

Findings also suggest that some students preferred and tended to stick only to co-nationals and had limited contact with host nationals. This seemed to be individuals’ preference but it might have limited their opportunities to socialise and learn from host nationals, which are a major resource of cultivating sociological adjustment:

I don’t often hang out with Thai friends. Mostly, I spend time with my Vietnamese friends. (Pawana, 3F)

In summary, students showed a positive orientation and seemed to adapt well to the host environment. Students made comparisons of several aspects of the host and their home countries. They did not mention which one they preferred but rather proposed that there were ‘similarities’ that enriched their sociocultural adjustment. Language difficulties were the main factor leading to problems in communication, preventing some students from building up connections with members of the host country.

The following figure summarises the positive, negative and problematising comments on sociocultural adjustment found in the first round of the interview.

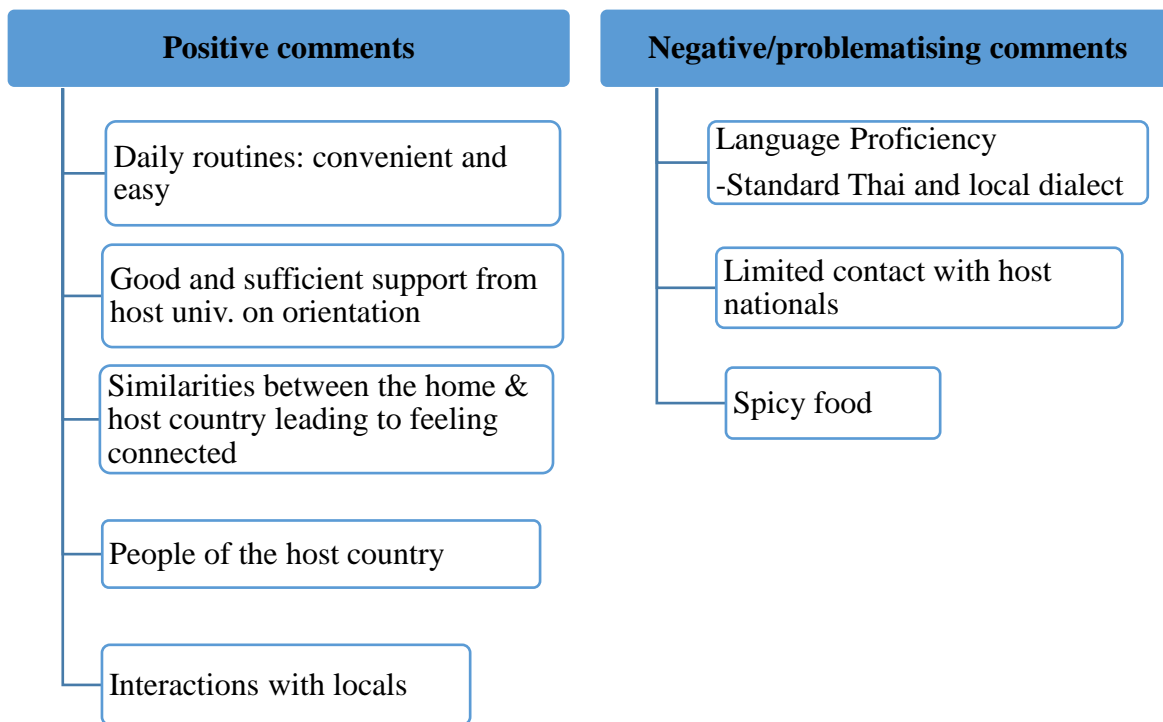


Figure 5.2 Summary of Comments on Sociocultural Adjustment at T1 Interview

### 5.1.2 Interviews T2: week 26 of the teaching weeks

By T2 students were six months and a half into their programmes of the new academic year. Overall, a majority of interviewees reported positively on their sociocultural adjustment, which was closely linked to their positive psychological adjustment when living in the host environment. For example, Tawan, a Year 0 student, stated “I am happy”. Similarly, Prachan, another student from the same year group, noted “Generally, life is fun”. Students from years 1 to 4 groups gave comments with positive words such as “convenient” and “comfortable,” as presented in the following extracts:

I feel that living in Thailand is convenient. (Phu, 1M)

I feel life is comfortable in Thailand. (Aran, 1M)

As the sojourn progressed, interviewees from Year 0 Group had been exposed to more social experiences, and so they gave more ‘fruitful’ and ‘detailed’ comments at the second interview round. At this point, they knew more about the host city and had become more confident in living and even doing routine activities alone, such as going shopping and exploring other parts of the country, as can be seen in the following extracts:

Now, I know a lot more about the city. I can travel and go shopping alone.  
(Tawan, 0M)

I've been travelling to Pattaya <sup>14</sup>with my Vietnamese friends. (Ploy, 2F)

Tawan, a Year 0 student, mentioned the accommodation where he and his roommates were stayed, "I'm staying with Vietnamese friends. Including me there are three people in the same room". He was quite open and eager to build up new social and friendship networks with peers of the host country who lived in the same accommodation as well. He seemed to mingle and was socially well-adjusted when he was among Thai friends. A new circle of friends brought him opportunities to join his Thai friends to do culturally specific activities such as 'making merit':

I also have Thai friends who live in the same accommodation. I go to chat with Thai friends [...] I have Thai friends now. My Thai friends invite me to make merit<sup>15</sup> and travel with them. I don't have any problems when I hanging out with Thai friends. (Tawan, 0M)

A similar comment was also reported by Pawana, a 3<sup>rd</sup> Year student as can be seen in the following extract:

I go to make merit with Thai friends several times. I'm also a Buddhist so I went offering<sup>16</sup> food to monks with them. That's very fun. (Pawana, 3F)

Pawana mentioned that Buddhism was introduced in orientation week to international students when they started their preparative course:

When I was in the 1st Year, the lecturer took students to Thai Buddhist temples. The lecturer taught us how to pay respect to the Buddha image and what to do when we visit temples. (Pawana, 3F)

An interviewee reported that she was a Catholic, her comment was salient to portray how students who were not Buddhist<sup>17</sup> or ones who held different religions or beliefs could worship freely and openly in Thailand. Fon, a 4<sup>th</sup> Year Catholic student, expressed her experience of attending church in the host country:

Since I am a Catholic, I go to church. I asked Thai people where a Catholic church was so I go to St. Mary Catholic church. At first when I joined Mass, since all prayers are written in Thai I just listened and I prayed in Vietnamese. (Fon, 4F)

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<sup>14</sup> Pattaya is a resort city and famous for its beaches. It is around 62 miles away from Bangkok, Thailand's capital city.

<sup>15</sup> Making merit is one of common Buddhist practices. Merit is the notion connected to purity or goodness which can be gained through several such as giving, doing good deeds, virtue and mental development.

<sup>16</sup> Offering food to monks is a common religious merit-making act which can be conducted early every morning when monks line the streets. Food also can be offered at temples as well in the late morning.

<sup>17</sup> Approximately 95 percent of all the people in Thailand are Buddhists but there is no state religion of the country.

Fon further mentioned that learning the language of the host country was not restricted only to the classroom because she could learn through prayers and hymns when going to church:

I met a Vietnamese sister at the church so she taught me and gave me a prayer book which was written in Thai. So, I started to read and sing along in Thai. (Fon, 4F)

Connecting with the host community enhanced Fon's overall experience of studying and living in the host country. This student developed her social integration through social contact with Thai people from church and she seemed to be well-adjusted in the religious community:

I join activities run by the church. For example, the Father asked me to help run activities or decorate the church for Christmas, I came. I know many Thai people from church and they also asked me to have dinner at their homes. (Fon, 4F)

Contacting and doing activities with students from the host country was also reported by several students such as playing sports and going shopping together:

I have some Thai friends. Mostly, they help me in studying. All friends are male. We play sports together. (Petch, 2M)

I have a Thai friend. I am quite close to him. We go shopping together. (Boon, 3M)

However, Ploy, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year student, mentioned that she had several friends from the host country but did not know any locals:

I can go anywhere by myself but I prefer to go with friends. I have both Thai and Vietnamese friends because it is more fun to travel with friends. [...] I have Thai friends but I don't know any locals who are not students. (Ploy, 2F)

Local transportation was a further topic raised by students. Like most interviewees, Ploy stated, "I've known how to use the local transportation since I was in my first year". Similar to most students, they stated that they knew how to use local transportation since the very beginning of their sojourn. At T2, some students revealed that they had bought motorcycles and drove them in their daily lives:

I drive a motorcycle like I did in Vietnam. [...] Yes, we can buy a motorcycle under a Thai person's name. I've got a test and driving license here. (Fah, 4F)

All students who used their own vehicles reported that they knew the rules and regulations for driving. Boon, a student who drove a motorcycle,<sup>18</sup> stated that he knew the traffic laws and regulations. Even it was against the Thai helmet law, the following student stated that he did

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<sup>18</sup> An underbone is a popular type of motorcycle used in Thailand.

not wear a helmet when driving a motorcycle because he observed a lot of locals did not wear helmets either:

I have a motorcycle. I know Thai traffic rules and regulations but sometimes I don't follow them such as wearing a helmet when driving a motorcycle, I don't wear it because I don't have a helmet. It's okay because I do like many Thai people do. (Petch, 2M)

Adjusting to Thai food was mentioned by several the students at T2 interview. Thai food was generally regarded too 'hot' and 'spicy' when compared to Vietnamese food. At this time, famous Thai dishes were mentioned by both Year 0 interviewees:

I can eat Thai food. I really like Thai food. Before this, my lecturers told me that Vietnamese students will say that 'Somtam'<sup>19</sup> is spicy but when we stay in Thailand for a long time, we will love it. (Tawan)

I like sticky rice and fried chicken. I like to eat 'Somtam' and 'Pad Thai'<sup>20</sup> (Prachan, 0F)

Findings indicate that most students could adjust to the 'hot and spicy' flavours of Thai food and started to enjoy it as time progressed. Positive comments were gained from students in other year groups as well:

I can eat Thai food. No problem. In the past I couldn't eat spicy foods but now I am OK with it. (Petch, 2M)

I like Thai food. It's delicious. (Ploy, 2F)

I enjoy eating Thai food and I eat too much. I gained 10 kilograms in 3 years. (Pawana, 3F)

Several students expressed positive views and highlighted positive characteristics of Thai people. Several described Thais as "nice" and "helpful":

Thai people are nice. They explain what I don't understand. (Aran, 1M)

Thai people are nice and helpful and that makes me feel like I'm living in my home country. (Fah, 4F)

At this round of the interview, students also made comparisons between people of the home and host country in many points such as appearance and other characteristics. Ploy mentioned that "Vietnamese and Thais look similar. We have the same skin and hair colour" so locals could not recognise who was a Thai or a Vietnamese. This student mentioned 'looking similar' meant she felt 'more relaxed' when she was among Thais. The other two interviewees

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<sup>19</sup> Somtam or Thai green papaya salad is one of the staples of Thai cuisine.

<sup>20</sup> Padthai, a stir-fried rice noodle.

compared Thais and Vietnamese in their different characteristics. Their comments were positive and preferable for people of the host country:

Thai and Vietnamese are very different. Thai people are more polite. Vietnamese people are like Chinese. They speak in loud voices. (Boon, 3M)

I think Thai people are more honest. [...] I forgot valuable stuff at a shop and I got it back. I don't think I would get back if I lost it in my country. (Pawana, 3F)

Fah, a 4<sup>th</sup> Year student, pointed out a notably different view, gained from experience in working a part-time job as a waitress. She emphasised that having a part-time job taught her lessons she could not have in classroom, "If I study only in the class room, I cannot notice this. I also do a part-time job so I can see this aspect". She started working when she was a 1<sup>st</sup> Year student. She had positive and preferable views towards the people of the host country in this aspect:

Working here is fun. Thai people like Vietnamese because Vietnamese are diligent and also can speak English and Thai. So, Thai people like to hire Vietnamese. [...] When my Thai boss asks both Thai and Vietnamese to work or deal with any tasks, Vietnamese will consider it an 'opportunity' but some Thai people think the assigned tasks are too 'difficult' and 'impossible' to do. (Fah, 4F)

She further reported her perception towards 'how' Thai people treated tasks or work:

My colleagues are also students. When the manager gives me tasks, even though the tasks are difficult I try to achieve them. For some Thai colleagues, they complain why the tasks are so difficult and ask for help before trying to do it. (Fah, 4F)

Fah also mentioned her aspiration to work in the host country after her graduation:

After graduation, I will find a job and work here because it is better pay. (Fah, 4F)

Communication problems in using Thai were mentioned by a Year 0 student and another complaint was added by a first year student. Students' proficiency in the host language was a critical factor in their communication with local people. However, none of the students who had lived a long time in the host environment (Year 2 to Year 4 groups) mentioned this concern. Prachan, a Year 0 student, was an example who faced this problem:

I have problems when talking with Thai friends. I have studied Thai language for 4 months. I am not good at Thai. Sometimes, I don't understand Thai friends. (Prachan, 0F)

The same problem was mentioned by Phu, a 1<sup>st</sup> Year student:

Sometimes, it is a little bit difficult when I don't understand difficult words. I ask my Thai friends to explain. Mostly, I understand Thai people. If I speak to

Thai people, if I don't understand I ask them to explain. If I still don't understand, I ask again and again. (Phu, 1M)

How the proficiency of the host language affects students' adjustment was also reflected through a retrospective view raised by Fon, a 4<sup>th</sup> Year student. As time progressed, this student acquired the language ability to a certain extent, and she used it as a means to cope with communication problems:

When I couldn't speak Thai, everything was so difficult. When I know some Thai, whatever I didn't know I'd ask. Thai people help me. (Fon, 4F)

Attaining the proficiency of the host language made this student feel like she was living in her home country and it could be interpreted that she had a positive sociocultural adjustment in the host country:

Living here in Thailand, I feel like I'm living in Vietnam with Vietnamese. This is because I can speak Thai now. Even if I am not really good at it, I can communicate well. (Fah, 4F)

Apart from problems in using standard Thai for communication, several students struggled to adjust to the local 'Isaan' dialect:

I have problems when communicating with friends who speak Isaan dialect.

They [locals] speak to me in Isaan, and I don't understand. (Petch, 2M)

I can speak some words but not so similar. I can understand the dialect. (Fah, 4F)

At T2, there were more positive comments than at T1. Adjusting to Thai food and travelling were the added topics while language proficiency was the major concern of students' sociocultural adjustment.

The following figure summarises the comments gained on students' sociocultural adjustment at the T2 interview.



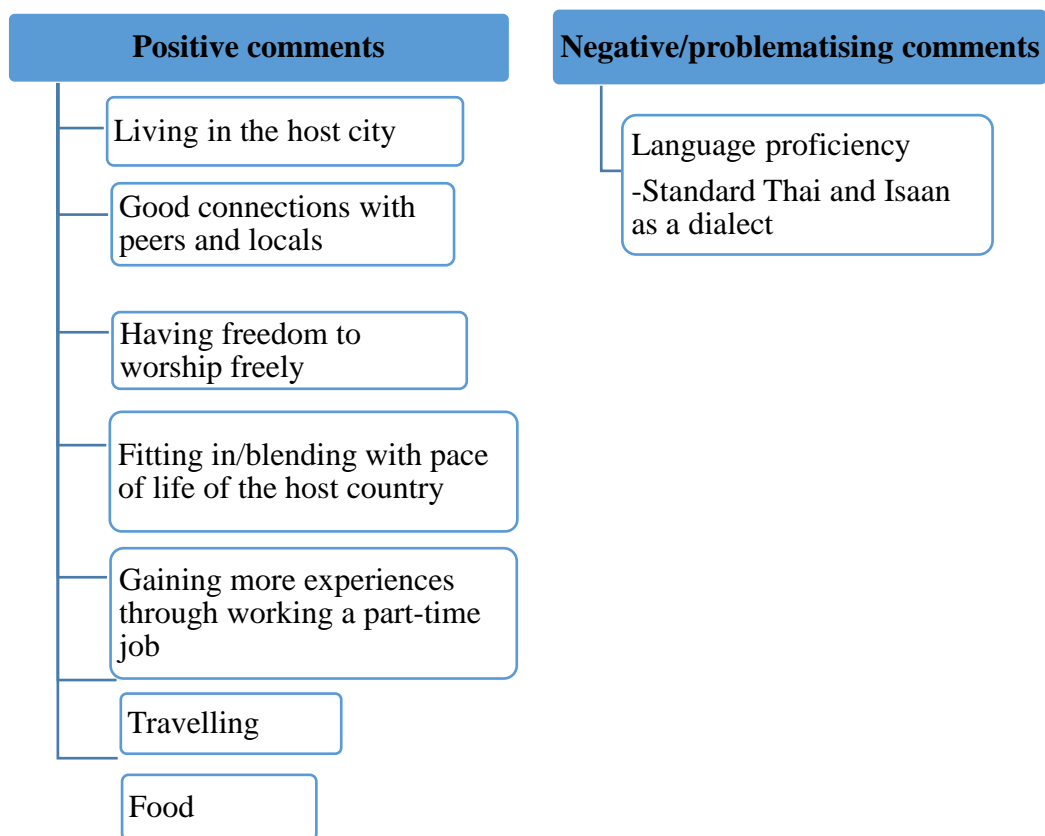


Figure 5.3 Summary of Comments on Sociocultural Adjustment at T2 Interview

## 5.2 Findings from Focus Groups

The following section presents qualitative findings gained from focus groups with five groups of students conducted between the T1 and T2 interviews. Students' sociocultural adjustment was probed through students' focus groups. Interesting findings on some topics which had not been mentioned in individual interviews were raised. Findings indicate that the majority of students reported positive sociocultural adjustment on their sojourns and seemed to adjust well to the host environment. Overall, students from every focus group mentioned that living in Thailand was described as "safe", "convenient" and "modern" and they were "happy" and felt "safe" and "easy" to adjust to the host environment. Their comments seemed to confirm what they said in the interview:

I have been in Thailand not so long. I like Thailand. I am happy to study and live here. (0C, F)

I feel life is comfortable and safe. There are no problems when going out. (1F, M)

No problem. It's easy to adjust to live in this city. (2A, F)

The city is quite safe. Even when I walk back home at 11 pm in the city I feel safe. (3H, M)

Living in Thailand is comfortable. It's like in Vietnam but it's more convenient and modern. (4B, F)

Forming friendship with local students was repeatedly mentioned by most students. They stated that it was not difficult to build good relationships with Thai friends. Many students had Thai roommates so it did not seem difficult for VUs to get to know peers from the host country. Since students studied with Thai students in the same class, they began to develop their friendships with Thai students as classmates. Several students stated that they had Thai friends as “close friends”. The following extracts present where students got to know Thai friends or what they did together with Thai friends:

I live in a female dormitory so I am living with a Thai friend. She's very nice. (0A, F)

I have four Thai close friends. We study in the same class. (2F, M)

Year 0 students reported that the university arranged accommodation for them. There were male and female dormitories situated on campus run by the university. All Year 0 students were arranged to stay in the dormitories on campus. Thus, students would stay with roommates, which could be *either* peers from their home *or* host country. There were three students living in the same bedroom. However, some salient comments were raised when a male participant mentioned Thai transgender students living in the same dormitory with them:

I feel a little bit uncomfortable when I walked past some transgender students or get close to them, since we live in the same dormitory. (0F, M)

There are a lot of 'Kratoeys'<sup>21</sup> in Thailand. Some are beautiful and some are not. Sometimes, I feel scared when some look at me since we live in the same dormitory. (0H, M)

According to these comments, sexuality and gender acceptance seemed to be an issue for these two students' adjustment. However, there were no reports that the university had educated or prepared students about the diversity of sexual orientation on campus. Except for these two negative comments on this issue, most students reported that they could adjust well to the accommodation and living environment.

Another interesting topic raised by students was about friendship networks. All students reported that they had friends from the home country. Most students noted that apart from having orientation by the university, they were advised by co-nationals who had lived in the host country about how to live and adjust in the new environment. All students reported that they had good friendship connections with co-nationals. However, some salient comments

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<sup>21</sup> A popular term used in Thailand when referring to a transgender male.

emerged from the discussion. A student mentioned that one form of socialising between newcomers and senior friends was formed through drinking and experiencing the nightlife together. Even though he did not want to join in such social activity, sometimes he could not avoid it in order to maintain the relationship. He referred to the word, 'seniority' among students:

Vietnamese students, some are good, some are not. Some love nightlife and always go to pubs. Some go out at night and drink a lot and forget about their studies [...] I have to go with 'Roon Pii'<sup>22</sup> sometimes. Then I learn to manage my time. (1H, M)

A further topic was about the benefits of having friends from the host country. Many students mentioned that they could practice Thai language in more authentic ways and had faster improvement:

This is very good for me to practice my Thai speaking. (0A, F)

I want to have many Thai friends so I can have conversations with them. This helps me to improve my Thai (2D, F)

It's faster to learn if we have Thai friends. The language will improve better. If I say something wrong, Thai friends will correct me so we learn to use the language naturally. (4F, M)

Another benefit students commented on in having friends from the host country was they had experiences to spend time, travel and enrol at festivals and learn from the local people:

We go shopping, eating, or travelling together. (0A, F)

In my opinion, if I live in any country, I should have friends from the host country. Now, I have around 20 Thai friends. They can help me a lot and we travel together...I have been to 'Chiang Khan'<sup>23</sup> and 'Khon Kaen'<sup>24</sup> with Thai friends. (0E, M)

My Thai friends and I go to make merit in Nong Khai<sup>25</sup>. (2F, M)

On Loy Krathong<sup>26</sup> Day, I joined Thai friends. I felt very happy. I joined this festival several years but I don't exactly know what this festival means. This year I learned the interpretations of the flowers, nails, hair that people put in the Krathong. My Thai friends explained to me why Thai people do like that. (4D, F)

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<sup>22</sup> Roon Pii is a Thai word means 'senior'

<sup>23</sup> Chiang Khan in a famous touristic district situated on the banks of the Mekhong River.

<sup>24</sup> Khon Kaen is one of the four major cities of Isaan.

<sup>25</sup> Nong Khai is a city on the southern bank of the Mekhong River. It is only 20 kms from Vientiane, the capital of Laos.

<sup>26</sup> Loy Krathong is one of the most popular annual festivals, celebrated on the full moon day of the 12<sup>th</sup> lunar month. Loy literally means 'to float' and a Krathong is a leaf cup usually made with banana leaves.

Apart from having positive contact with Thai friends from the university, students reported overwhelmingly positive comments on the people of the host country. Locals were often described as “nice”, “helpful” and always “smiling”:

There are no problems because Thai people are nice. When they know that I’m Vietnamese, they give me support and help. (0E, M)

The people like to help me a lot. They like to teach me Thai. That’s why many foreigners come to Thailand. People are always smiling. (0H, M)

I feel Thai people are nice. Thai people are helpful and they teach me Thai. (3F, M)

Thai people are helpful, and they like to help others. (3G, M)

The following issue raised by a 4<sup>th</sup> Year student emphasised the importance of “human relationships”:

I think human relationships are very important and I can learn a lot from having contact with Thai people. So, I know the others. (4A, F)

Several students mentioned that they felt welcome because locals tried to communicate or interact with them:

When the sellers slow down their speed in their speaking. (0D, F)

When they know that I’m Vietnamese, they give me support and help. (0E, M)

A number of students mentioned that the major obstacle that affected their communication was their proficiency of the Thai language:

When I talk to Thai people, it’s a little bit difficult because what I said is right or wrong. Thai people don’t know Vietnamese, so it’s difficult to communicate. (0C, F)

Several students from Year 4 Group mentioned doing a part-time job helped them improve their Thai language so it positively affected their study as well as having a positive effect on their integration:

I started to work part time at a Thai restaurant when I was in Year 2. Now, I am more and more like Thais. (4A, F)

It’s very beneficial for my study, especially the accent. I want to have a Thai accent because it’s good when I talk to lecturers so they will understand me clearly in class. Working among Thais is really beneficial to help me understand the idioms or slang. (4B, F)

I started to work a part time job at a hotel when I was in Year 2. It helped me a lot in my learning, my pronunciation and I have more opportunities in listening. (4F, M)

Joining clubs run by students of the host country was referred to as a source to learn and know more about Thai people. The following extract was expressed by a student, stating a “weak point” of Thai people she learnt from participating in activities:

I like to join clubs and do extra-curricular activities. There are many interesting activities. The university’s activities run by Thai students are good but I can see a weak point of Thai people. They are always late. (4A, F)

Social integration to the broader community was mentioned as a source to learn about the host country:

I like to join the activities or go out to learn from the community. (4G, M)

Another student commented on her first-hand experience in observing the difference between a Buddhist religious practice between home and host country:

I visited my Thai friend’s home once and I learned that Thai people offer foods to monks at home in the morning, but in Vietnam monks are at the temples. So, if Vietnamese people want to make merit or offer foods to monks, they have to go to temples.<sup>27</sup> (2H, M)

A salient comment raised by a 3<sup>rd</sup> Year student mentioned the longer he stayed in the host country, the more understandings he had towards Thai people’s culture and behaviour:

I understood more and more about the language and culture. For example, Thai people’s behaviour. I’ve learnt that Thai people have strong beliefs in religion. Thai people love to make merit. (3G, M)

As the sojourn progressed, most students stated that they adjusted to Thai food and liked it, as can be seen in the following extract:

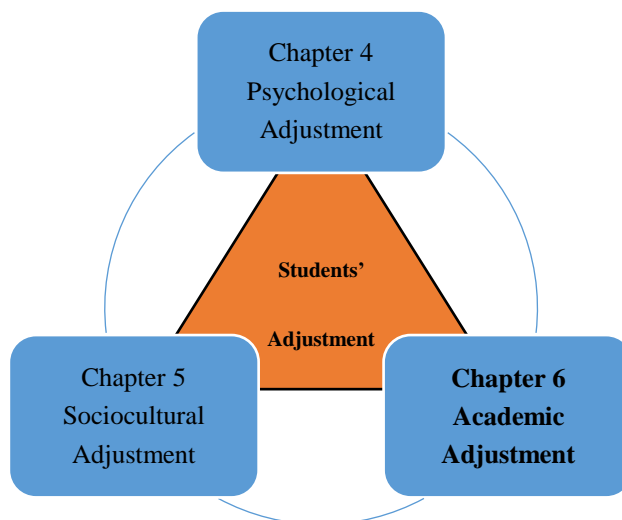
When I just arrived in, I couldn’t eat Thai food. It’s spicy, very sour, and very sweet. Now, I really like Thai food and ‘Somtam’. (4F, M)

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<sup>27</sup> Though Thai and Vietnam are Buddhist countries, they are dominated by different sects. Thai is dominated by Hinayana while Vietnam is dominated by the Mahayana sect. Srichampa, S. (2006) 'Thai and Vietnamese proverbs and common expressions: the influence of Buddhist and local beliefs', *The Mon-Khmer Studies Journal*, 36, pp. 103-120.

## Chapter 6. Findings on the Students' Academic Domain

This chapter presents the qualitative findings focusing on the processes of students' academic adjustment (see Figure 6.1). Findings regarding the psychological and sociocultural adjustment domains were presented in the previous chapters (Figure 6.1).



*Figure 6.1 The Focus of Chapter 6: Academic Adjustment*

In this chapter, students' academic adjustment is analysed and presented in themes which include students' attitudes, strategies used to cope with stress, and problems arising from academic requirements, along with issues contributing to students' successful adjustment in the new environment.

This chapter consists of two sections. Firstly, the qualitative findings gained from two rounds of semi-structured interviews will be summarised and presented (6.1); second, the findings gained from the focus groups are addressed (6.2).

### **6.1 Findings from the Semi-Structured Interviews**

This section presents qualitative findings gained from two rounds of semi-structured interviews on students' experiences of studying at the host university.

#### **6.1.1 Interviews T1: early teaching weeks**

T1 was conducted at the beginning of the semester when Year 0 students had just arrived in a new country and had been studying on the preparative course for several days. They

mentioned that the most difficult thing was the language of the host country, which was an issue similarly raised by most other groups. Across the sample as a whole, the majority of students seemed to be positive and highly motivated and enthusiastic to learn. Comparisons between previous experiences in their home country and expectations of teaching and learning in the home country were raised. A majority commented that the language of the host country was the biggest concern for them since it was the medium of teaching and learning:

Thai language is difficult. (Pawana, 3F)

I think studying here is difficult because of the language. (Aran, 1M)

Academic Thai, particularly writing, was the biggest challenge, as illustrated below:

Writing is the most difficult. (Phu, 1M)

In writing, when I have to write ‘Karan’<sup>28</sup>, I don’t understand. Writing is the most difficult for me. (Fon, 4F)

However, the students from Year 0 group reported that the lessons were well planned, starting with easy tasks and proceeding to more complex and difficult ones, so they had positive feedback on the preparative course:

I felt the lessons at the beginning were easy and fun. (Tawan, 0M)

Studying is fun. Teaching is easy to understand. (Prachan, 0F)

Phu, a 1<sup>st</sup> year student, similarly noted:

The preparative course is useful for international students, especially writing, because foreign students are not good at writing. (Phu, 1M)

Prachan further mentioned that learning Thai was “easy” since she found similar aspect between the language of host and home country:

Thai language is easy because the grammar is similar to Vietnamese. (Prachan, 0F)

Phu also mentioned that he had to adjust to study in air-conditioned rooms:

At first, I could not get used to the air-conditioned rooms. I felt so sleepy but now I am used to it. Studying here is better than in Vietnam. There are air-conditioned rooms and fresh air. (Phu, 1M)

A number of students who had spent several years in the host country spoke about the

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<sup>28</sup> The mark placed over the final consonant of a word in Thai to indicate that it is mute.

differences in teaching and the learning mode of the host and home country. They mentioned that the Vietnamese educational system seemed to stress 'rote learning' more than the Thai:

In Vietnam, students study harder. Classes start at 7.00 a.m. and finish around noon. Then, in the afternoon classes will start again at 1.30 pm and finish at 5.00 pm. (Ploy, 2F)

Studying here is better. In Vietnam, teaching focuses on rote learning while in Thailand it focuses both on theory and practice... Study and then practice. In Vietnam, teaching and learning focus more on reading and memorisation. (Boon, 3M)

Fon, a 4<sup>th</sup> Year student, compared the number of compulsory courses in the home and host country. She mentioned her learning experiences in the host environment:

I think studying here is not as tough as in Vietnam because the number of compulsory courses is fewer than in Vietnam. However, I have to learn a lot of things even though there are not many class hours compared to studying in Vietnam. The contents of several subject are difficult, mixed with language. I learn a lot to discuss and do presentations in groups. (Fon, 4F)

Several students compared subjects taught and found that several major subjects in Thailand seemed easier than in their home country:

It is like in Vietnam. Some subject are difficult and some are easy. [...] Accounting and English are easier here. (Ploy, 2F)

The language is difficult. Calculation is easy here. (Pawana, 3F)

Salient comments were made by a number of students. For example, Ploy, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year student, mentioned a subject concerning Buddhism, which was a compulsory course:

The subject about temples and the Lord Buddha... I really don't understand the subject. (Ploy, 2F)

This was relevant to Fon's comment towards the religion subject:

Buddhism is difficult. The names of people and places are long and hard to remember (Fon, 4F)

On the whole, students seemed highly motivated to study and their first priority in learning was to improve their academic Thai. Phu, a 1<sup>st</sup> Year student mentioned, that ISs were informed about the academic requirements of the host university at the very beginning of the course:

All lecturers told us [international students] that we will go through the same teaching mode and assessment as Thai students. Thus, learning is our responsibility and we have to adjust. (Phu, 1M)



According to the university's academic requirements, this might be a crucial factor that forced students to prepare themselves to study in the host university. Therefore, students were eager to improve their language proficiency as soon as possible. The following quotations present students' strategies to cope with the learning difficulties they experienced. Many mentioned getting academic support from fellow students from the host country:

Fellow students help me a lot in my studying. I will call and message friends or go to see them and ask them to explain for me. (Aran, 1M)

My Thai friends told me that I could ask them anytime if there is anything I don't understand about the assignment. They even show me their homework as an example but they ask me not to copy their work. They are very helpful. I can call them even late night. (Fon, 4F)

Several students mentioned that they asked questions if they did not understand in class and they mentioned that the lecturers were kind and willing to answer them. Lecturers were described as approachable and supportive. A student mentioned that he would ask and try to understand the lesson as much as he could in class. He kept asking questions until he understood the lessons:

The first thing I do is ask the lecturer to clarify if there are points that I don't understand. The lecturers are kind and happy to answer all my questions. (Boon, 3M)

Although Boon was satisfied with most lecturers, he found that some lecturers seemed not to fulfil the roles as he expected they would. There was a mismatch between his expectations towards the roles of Thai lecturers:

I ask too many questions but some lecturers did not answer all my questions. I think some Thai lecturers are less committed than Vietnamese lecturers because if I ask questions to Vietnamese lecturers, they will explain until I understand and I can go to see them even after working time. (Boon, 3M)

Many students mentioned self-regulated learning as a strategy they employed to make them understand the lesson better.

I review the lessons after class at the dormitory. (Prachan, 0F)

I spend 2 hours for self-study each day. (Petch, 2M)

I always read before class (Boon, 3M)

Petch, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year student, said that he always spent time to prepare before class and review after class. When he comes across difficult vocabulary, he uses Google translation or asks friends:

I use Google translation and ask friends to explain what I don't understand.  
(Petch, 2M)

The findings show that several students improved their academic language as time progressed. A 1<sup>st</sup> Year student reported that his study was going well; however, he mentioned that the language made his studying difficult and the contents of the subjects would become more and more difficult as he advanced in his studies:

My study is going well but I am just in the 1st Year. [...] I think studying here is difficult because of the language. It will be more difficult in Year 2.  
(Aran, 1M)

This was similar to a comment made by Ploy, a 2<sup>rd</sup> Year student:

When I just arrived I studied with Thai students because I didn't understand anything. Now, my language has improved a lot. I feel that my study is going well. (Ploy, 2F)

To sum up, students reported learning was fun and they seemed to adjust well. The language of the host country was the key to students' success in learning and the biggest concern for their academic adjustment. Students mentioned that they had positive support from home students and lecturers and their language proficiency seemed to improve as time progressed.

### **6.1.2 Interviews T2: week 26 of the teaching weeks**

The second round of interviews was conducted when the students had been in the second semester for two weeks. The students gave more detailed comments at T2 than T1. Generally, they seemed highly motivated and well-adjusted and their adjustment seemed to develop as time progressed, as can be seen in the following comments:

I'm not tired. I enjoy classes very much. (Prachan, 0F)

I'm adjusting. I feel it's better than the previous years. (Ploy, 2F)

I can adjust well. (Boon, 3M)

A made some positive comments about studying in the host country, illustrating that he seemed to be open and have positive attitude to learn in a foreign environment:

I am studying in a foreign country. It's okay that there are things that I don't understand. (Aran, 1M)

However, several students revealed that they still struggled to cope with academic Thai. Tawan, a Year 0 student, mentioned that even though he enjoyed classes, he found that the subject contents were more difficult when he advanced in his studies:

So far, I've studied the 5<sup>th</sup> subject. It's getting harder. (Tawan, 0M)

Petch, a Year 2 student, stated that he felt "worried" when he studied the complex content of more subjects:

I am worried very much because Thai is not my first language. The language is so difficult. [...] I feel more worried because I haven't expected that it would be so difficult like this. [...] All the subjects are more difficult. (Petch, 2M)

Petch further mentioned that Buddhism was one of the most difficult subjects for him. He stated that he didn't have to study any religions at school in his country:

We have religions but we don't have to study in class. (Petch, 2M)

When students attained a certain degree of language proficiency, they could follow the class. Better language proficiency had a positive result on their academic adjustment, as can be seen in a comment made by Ploy, a 2<sup>nd</sup> Year student:

I can follow the lecturers and catch their words. My grade is a little better than in 1<sup>st</sup> Year. I got 2.31 in the first Year, Now, I've got 2.34. (Ploy, 2F)

Fah mentioned that her language ability resulted in a better academic performance and kept her from asking questions. When she attained a degree of language proficiency, she seemed to be more confident to ask questions:

When I was a 1st Year student, my grade was not so high because I didn't know Thai much. When I was in Year 2 and Year 3, I started to ask questions about what I didn't understand. (Fah, 4F)

Apart from the Thai language, a salient point was raised by Boon, a 3<sup>rd</sup> Year student, who would like to improve his English as well:

I like to go to the library to find English textbooks because my English is not good. I should be good at English because it's important. (Boon, 3M)

In a similar vein, one student mentioned that English was used to communicate when her Thai language ability was limited:

I was very excited to speak Thai with lecturers and Thai friends. When I first arrived in Thailand, I used English to communicate. (Fon, 4F)

Concerns about Thai language ability were often mentioned as directly leading to academic difficulties. Writing was the academic area most mentioned and considered the most difficult and most important for most students. Since students had to take assessment in the form of a written examination, it was a critical factor to force them to improve their writing skills:

Since I have written exams, I have to practice my writing. (Petch, 2M)

I have to improve my language as soon as possible. I feel that my language has improved a lot because I have written exams. (Pawana, 3F)

The following two students noted an interesting strategy to improve their language through online communities such as Facebook<sup>29</sup>. They used this virtual community to contact friends from the home and host country and practiced their Thai by reading and responding in Thai:

I read the status my Thai friends posted on FB. If I don't understand, I just use Google translation. (Prachan, 0F)

When I post or respond to messages on Facebook, sometimes I use Thai and sometimes I use Vietnamese. (Phu, 1M)

Two students who were taking the preparative course mentioned strategies they used to improve their language:

I try to concentrate on the lecture. (Tawan, 0M)

I try to use Thai when talking to Thai friends. (Prachan, 0F)

Phu, a 1<sup>st</sup> Year student, used several strategies to cope with learning challenges, both in outside classroom:

I ask the lecturers and friends in class when I don't understand. When I don't understand the assignment, I call my friends, send them messages or go to see them in their rooms to ask them to explain it for me. (Phu, 1M)

Most students from every year group expressed that they preferred to study in the host country rather than in their home country. They mentioned that class time in Vietnam seemed to be longer than in Thailand, and the lessons taught in the home country seemed to stress theory rather than practice, with limited learning activities:

I prefer to study in Thailand because in Vietnam students study long hours starting from 7 o'clock. They study both in the morning and afternoon. In Thailand, we don't have to study too many hours like that. (Prachan, 0F)

I like to study here because the lecture is not too long and students also learn through practice. (Petch, 2M)

In Vietnam, classes are lecture-based. If a class lasts 2-3 hours, the lecturer will lecture and focus on theory. There are no other learning activities in class. Just sitting and listening to lectures (Fah, 4F).

Fah, a 4<sup>th</sup> Year student, elaborated more on how a lesson was delivered in the host country:

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<sup>29</sup> A Facebook status is a feature that allows users to post and share a small amount of content. It provides opportunities for users to comment and interact based on what is shared

Studying here, a class lasts 3 hours. The lecturers lecture for 30 minutes and then there are varieties of learning activities and tasks for students to learn through them. Then, the lecturers will wrap up at the end of class. It is fun to learn this way. I prefer to study by this teaching approach. (Fah, 4F)

Several students mentioned that class activities or tasks were run as group work. Therefore, students had opportunities to study and interact with domestic students since they were in Year 1. Getting support from fellow classmates from the host country was a major strategy to cope with academic difficulties when dealing with any learning tasks or activities. A comment made by Fon, a 4<sup>th</sup> Year student, underlined the importance of group-work assignments which allowed ISs to engage with home students to interact in order to complete the assigned tasks:

When I was in the second semester of Year 1, I started to understand the lecture and I had Thai friends who helped me in learning and doing tasks and group work (Fon, 4F)

Although most students reported that they could learn and improve a lot from group work, the following comment by a 3<sup>rd</sup> Year student indicated that not everyone enjoyed learning through it:

I prefer individual work rather than group work. (Boon, 3M)

A 4<sup>th</sup> Year student, Fah, mentioned that there was a lot of group work, so she had to manage her time wisely since she also did a part-time job and combining both was a good experience for her:

I liked when I was in Year 3 the most because I studied very hard. There was a lot of group work and I also did a part-time job. At that time, I learnt how to manage my time, I could do it. I really liked that time. (Fah, 4F)

Many students mentioned that apart from group work, they also had individual work and that academic support from home students was necessary with this:

I've got a lot of help from Thai friends. If I don't understand anything, I can ask them and they are willing to answer. They show me their homework as a guideline but ask me not to copy their work. (Fon, 4F)

Support from lecturers was also needed by international students. Prachan, a student who had just started her study at the host university, had a positive comment on the lecturers:

The lecturers are very supportive. I like to study Thai with Thai lecturers. (Prachan, 0F)

As time progressed, most students formed closer relationships with their lecturers. They felt more confident to consult and ask the lecturers' questions:

When I was in Year 1, I was not so close to lecturers but when I was in Year 2. When I am in Year 4, I felt closer to them. I sent messages through Facebook to lecturers. The lecturers are willing to answer my questions. (Fah, 4F)

It was found from the study that there was a relationship between length of residence in the host environment and students' learning skills and academic achievement, as can be seen from statements given by the following 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Year students:

My grade is better than in the 1st Year. I got 2.31 in the 1<sup>st</sup> Year. Now I've got 2.34. (Ploy, 2F)

My listening has improved a lot since I've been here. (Boon, 3M)

Now, I understand the lecturers. I take notes in Thai. (Pawana, 3F)

Right now, everything is alright. I understand almost everything. It's much easier than the first year. I can follow and understand the lecturers' every point and the pace they speak at. (Fon, 4F)

Several students stated that they were satisfied with their academic progress even though their grades were not so good. For example, Fah, a 4<sup>th</sup> Year student who mentioned that she would like to work in the home country when she graduated, noted:

Right now, I am satisfied with it but it's not so good. [...] Having grades like that is alright for me. I just want to graduate and then I can find a job. (Fah, 4F)

Apart from the length of residence, interacting with people of the host country was mentioned as a key factor that helped develop this Year 4 student's overall language proficiency:

When I studied Thai on the preparative course for 8 months, I didn't get the language skills much because in class there were only Vietnamese students. I had opportunities to use the language when I went to the community or shopping. I'd like to confess I didn't know how to use the language until the first semester in Year 1. (Fon, 4F)

To conclude, students seemed to have a positive academic adjustment in general. The most challenging concern for students at T2 was their host language ability. Students learned and improved their language proficiency by having interactions with both locals and home students. Students were assigned to complete assignments as groups, so they had opportunities to interact and use academic language with peers from the host country. As time progressed, students' academic achievements seemed to improve over time. Academic support from lecturers and fellow classmates were key factors that fostered ISs' academic success in this study. Interactions with host nationals and domestic students enhanced students' language ability. Many students engaged in self-regulated learning and adopted

many strategies to cope with their studies. Several did part-time jobs in order to practice the language of the host country.

## 6.2 Findings from Focus-Groups

Overall, students were satisfied with teaching and learning at the host university. They seemed to be well-adjusted since they got adequate support from lecturers and friends from the host country. The findings revealed that the ‘lecturers’ seemed to be a major factor that facilitated students’ success. Comments gained from the Year 0 Group displayed positive words such as “good” and “good care”, illustrating that they were satisfied with the teaching and learning at the host university:

I don’t have any problems with the learning system here. I think studying in this university is good because lecturers take good care of students. If the students do not understand, they are willing to explain and give support [...]. The lecturers are kind and take good care of all students. (0C, F)

The teaching and the system here are good for foreign students. The lecturers teach well. (0G, M)

The lecturers are very supportive and well prepared for class. (0Hm)

Similar comments were found in other groups. Positive comments towards lecturers were reflected through the word “supportive”, and it seemed to result in students’ having a positive mood for learning:

I am very happy to study with Thai lecturers. (1E, F)

Lecturers are very supportive... I feel very happy. (1H, F)

Apart from learning the content, students learnt the culture of the host country. A student commented on Thai traditional greeting he practiced when studying in the host country:

Thai and Vietnamese are different in the way we greet lecturers. In Vietnam, I just greet the lecturers, but in Thailand I have to show my respect with appropriate gestures. In Thailand, students greet and ‘Wai’<sup>30</sup> lecturers, not just greet. (3G, M)

According to findings, another key factor that facilitated ISs’ learning was home students. Since students were assigned to complete tasks in groups, peers from the host country played a pivotal role in ISs’ adjustment, so building good learning relationships was crucial:

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<sup>30</sup> Wai is the Thai greeting to show respect. It consists of a slight bow with the hands pressed together in a prayer-like fashion.

I feel that my Thai friends are sincere and helpful so having them helps me a lot in learning new things in Thailand. When I come to study here, I feel warm. Thai friends are sincere to help, especially in my study programme. (0F, M)

I've got support from fellow students, Thai friends. My study is improving (1E, M)

A student on the preparative course gave a positive comment on the course and summarised what he experienced in his early academic sojourn:

I think that there are many interesting activities in this course. The students themselves, we help each other. That's why we don't have many problems in classrooms. We are trying to improve our language every day, trying to speak with Thai friends or going to the market to buy things. (0H, M)

As time progressed, students' proficiency seemed to develop since they had more opportunities to interact and use the language:

When I had just arrived, I couldn't communicate at all because I didn't know Thai vocabulary. Right now, it's much better because I know more about the vocab. (0G, M)

Now my listening is much better than in the 1st Year. (2 F, M)

If we cannot speak Thai, we cannot do anything (4C, F)

When students' language ability improved, their academic adjustment also developed:

I think my study is better than in Year 1 (2E, M)

I think I have improved a lot with the language. It's much better when I have to do group work with friends. I can do more effective presentations. (2D, M)

When students advanced in their studies, more complex and difficult subjects were taught. Several students felt "worried", especially when they came across difficult academic vocabulary:

I am worried, especially about Thai history and religion because the vocabulary is so difficult. The language used for the Royal Family and proper names are so long and difficult. (3G, M)

It's harder and harder. On the preparative course, it was just basic Thai. When I study in this programme, it's more difficult. There is a lot of terminology. (3H, M)

Studying in Year 3 is quite difficult. I think Thai Culture and Law are the hardest subjects. (3F, M)

The following comment gained from a 4<sup>th</sup> Year student revealed that it took years for her to adjust, but she seemed to feel more confident as time progressed:



I think I could really adjust when I was in Year 2. In the first Year, I didn't get good grades so I started to concentrate more and I've got better and better grades. (4A, F)

Almost all students mentioned group work. A number of students reported that they could learn a lot from working in groups:

I learn from Thai friends a lot. I like to join a group with Thai friends rather than with Vietnamese. (3F, M)

Studying by having group work is good because we can learn from friends and we can achieve difficult tasks. (4D, F)

However, a student mentioned that even though group work was useful and helped students to accomplish difficult tasks, individual work was also important. Above all, he believed that it depended on the students themselves:

I think everything depends on the student. (1H, M)

The findings also revealed that students mentioned the differences they found between the home and host academic settings:

When I was in high school in Vietnam, every student seemed to study very hard, harder than here. They are very committed to learning. (2C, F)

Students in Vietnam spend more time doing a lot of assignments and study all day long. (3B, F)

Apart from studying at the university, a number of students did a part-time job because they wished to practice their language, which in turn could benefit their learning:

I started to work a part time job at a hotel when I was in Year 2. It helps me a lot in my learning. My pronunciation is better because I have more opportunities in listening. (4F, M)

I like to join the activities or go out to learn from the community. (4G, M)

To sum up, the findings gained from focus groups largely confirm those gained from the interviews. Students had positive academic adjustment by getting effective and adequate support from lecturers and home students. Group work was effective and was considered a learning tool to engage international and home students to learn together and from one another. There was a fairly strong association between students' academic progress and the length of studies and residence in the host country. The longer they had been in the host country, the more likely they were to adapt and develop language proficiency and learn skills necessary for their studies.

## Chapter 7. Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings that emerged from the data. It begins with the discussion on students' psychological adjustment (7.1) followed by students' sociocultural adjustment (7.2) and students' academic adjustment respectively (7.3).

### 7.1 Discussion of Students' Psychological Adjustment over Time

The overall picture of the students' PWB assessed in this study indicates that students were satisfied with life and had positive psychological adjustment since there were few negative reports about their sojourn. In this study, even though some students reported several mild to medium degrees of stress and anxiety, the vast majority of the students showed no undue psychological stress.

When the findings of this study are applied to the U-curve hypothesis, the most widely known recuperation model (Lysgaard, 1955), there are two possible ways to compare them with the model. The U-curve model is a longitudinal study conducted for more than 48 hours proposing a full pattern of adjustment covering four stages: honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment and mastery. This current study was a quasi-longitudinal study conducted within six months covering two stages of students' sojourn when compared to the model. From this perspective, the findings coincide with the 'honeymoon' stage at T1 measure and the curve slightly dropped at T2 but the overall pictures still illustrated positive psychological adjustment, which did not follow the 'culture shock stage' (Oberg, 1960) as the literature suggested. However, although some students reported that they were stressed when it was 'assignment or exam season' as well as feeling lonely and depressed from time to time, there were not any reports of students' signs of severe physical, mental or emotional health problems throughout the period of observation in this study.

Interestingly, in light of this study, some of the findings are parallel and some are contrastive to Lysgaard's work. Lysgaard compared three groups of Norwegian students who had been Fulbright scholars in the U.S. It was found that students who had been in the U.S. for six-eighteen months reported lower adjustment than those who had been there fewer than six months or more than eighteen months. However, Lysgaard did not give any theoretical explanation or statistical proof for his findings. On the contrary, qualitative findings along with the statistics tests (see 4.3.1) in this study affirm that students who have been in the host country between six and eighteen months (Year 1 students) reported higher scores on their

PWB scales than other groups, a finding which contrasts with Lysgaard's work (see the following figure).

Since this study was conducted with five groups of students who had been in different lengths of residence<sup>31</sup> in the host country, these findings can be viewed from an alternative perspective. The findings illustrate a blueprint of a continuum of students' sojourn starting from the first to the final year of a Bachelor's degree programme in Thailand. According to the qualitative findings, a majority of students exhibited initial 'honeymoon' stage euphoria (Lysgaard, 1955; Oberg, 1960) since they were positive and anticipated new experiences as ISs. Then, the line gradually declined in Year 2, exhibited an upward-sloping pattern of adjustment in Year 3 and stayed more settled in Year 4. At this point, the students' adjustment seemed to follow Lysgaard's proposed model, excluding the 'culture shock' stage (see the following chart)

What is apparent in the present research is that there is a strong link between students' psychological adjustment and the academic calendar. A study by Selby and Woods (1966) argued that foreign students' moods were likely to rise and fall in line with the academic calendar, not the U-curve pattern. A study conducted by (Selby and Woods, 1966); Tolmie *et al.* (2011) revealed that presentations and exams could be academic sources of stress and anxiety. Students could be stressful and anxious before, during or even the days after an exam. However, a research discovered that good general support and the degree and quality of social relationships could lessen students' stress and result in higher levels of PWB (Young *et al.*, 2013).

The findings of this study also correspond with more recent study conducted with ISs. It was found that their adjustment was affected by the academic calendar (academic workload and examinations), not new cultural encounters (Hechanova-Alampay *et al.*, 2002). Even though stressors such as academic workload and examinations could trigger students' negative feelings, none of the interviewees reported feelings indicating signs or symptoms of high levels of stress and anxiety.

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<sup>31</sup>T1 measure: Year 1-4: week 5-6 (10<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> Sep.14); Year 0: week 1 (30<sup>th</sup> Sep-3<sup>rd</sup> Oct. 14)

T2 measure: Year 1-4: week 25-26 (27<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> Jan. 15); Year 0: week 26 (24<sup>th</sup> Mar. 15)

To conclude, the findings from the interviews portray a smooth transition throughout the sojourn of students' psychological adjustment, as illustrated in the following figure:

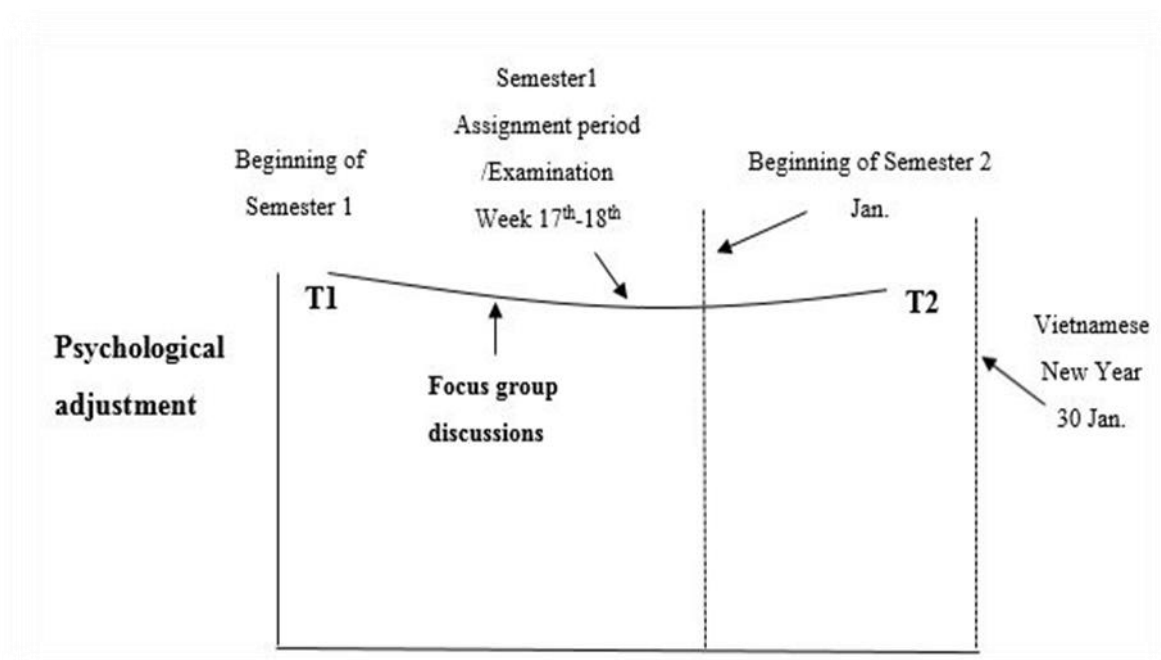


Figure 7.1 Students' Psychological Adjustment Trend<sup>32</sup>

According to the findings, the phenomenon of a smooth sojourn of students' psychological adjustment could be explained by evidence of support students received throughout their sojourn. Interview data highlights that good and adequate support students received from students from the host country, lecturers, and local people resulted in their positive psychological adjustment. A study conducted by Furukawa (1997) pointed out the importance of the cultural distance of foreign and the foreign community. The study stated that the greater the cultural distance between ISs and the new environment (foreign community), the greater the psychological distress.

Social ties and social support are also major factors that facilitate students' positive PWB. The findings of this current study reveal contrastive results from the study conducted by Everts and Sodjakusumah (1996). In Everts' and Sodjakusumah' study, it was found that the major source of problems experienced by Indonesian students in Canada and New Zealand concerned social ties and social support, and they expressed that it was problematic to interact with members of the host society. Indonesian students claimed that it was not easy to make

<sup>32</sup> The figure presents the time in collecting data from students Year 1 to Year 4 groups; the data gained from year 0 was collected later and its length of time between T1 and T2 was the same as other groups.

friends with NZ students. In this study, VUs revealed that it is not difficult for them to make friends with students from the host country and with local people.

Another interesting findings from this research is coping strategies. Students reported that they employed different coping strategies, such as recreational activities and exercises. The weather was reported as “pleasant,” a factor which seemed to lift moods (possibly because it allowed students to enjoy outdoor activities). Previous studies have revealed that styles of coping were related to adjustment outcomes. For example, coping strategies such as positive thinking and using humour predicted positive PWB whereas withdrawal and avoidance predicted negative PWB (Ward and Kennedy, 1994; Ward and Kennedy, 2001).

The findings from this study also showed that some students held positive belief, known as self-efficacy, and that this was used as a stress coping strategy. Several students practiced religious coping, correlating with the findings of a study conducted by Chai *et al.* (2012) which showed that religious coping was more often utilised by Asian ISs than by European college students. The study argued this style of coping was more efficient for improving PWB and quality of social life (*ibid*). In this current study, VUs could practice and worship freely according to their beliefs. Several students meditated, prayed, made merit and visited temples regularly, which could be regarded as cultural specific activities for stress coping employed by students.

#### **7.1.1 *Overview of students' psychological adjustment***

This section has presented and discussed the qualitative findings and presented an overview of students' psychological adjustment. Data gained from focus groups supported the data gained from interviews at T1 and T2 showing that most students were optimistic and satisfied with their lives and quite well-adjusted. Findings further revealed that there is a strong link between students' psychological adjustment and the academic calendar.

Major concerns for students' PWB included poor language proficiency, homesickness, academic demands, etc. Students' coping strategies employed to alleviate these worries included gaining social contact and support from friends, family and lecturers, doing recreational activities and exercise, and having positive belief towards self, etc. (see Figure 5.3). An interesting emerging data on students' coping strategy was 'making merit', a common Buddhist (and so a very culturally specific) practice which students utilised as a coping strategy.

In the next section, the qualitative findings on students' sociocultural adjustment will be presented and discussed.

## **7.2 Discussion of Students' Sociocultural Adjustment over Time**

The following section provides a discussion of students' sociocultural adjustment over time. The discussion was drawn from the gathered qualitative data and culture-learning notion on sociocultural adjustment conceptualised by Ward et al. (2001). Based on culture learning theory, in order to be culturally well-adjusted, a sojourner needs to learn culturally relevant knowledge, social skills and attitudes required for effective communication and interactions with people in the host country. The process in culture learning is dynamic, ongoing, and developmental, aiming to engage the learners cognitively, behaviourally, and affectively.

When relocating to go to study, both domestic and international students confront a range of common challenges such as academic pressures, health problems, interpersonal conflicts, problems with developing personal autonomy and difficulty in adjusting to change (Baker and Siryk, 1986). Common challenges international students encounter can range from daily life tasks such as getting food to getting a vehicle, and practical difficulties such as financial arrangements, accommodation, living conditions and the weather (Lee, 2014). However, compared to domestic students, international students possibly encounter more extra and unique challenges and greater changes emerging from cultural differences upon arrival in a new environment (Araujo, 2011). Sociocultural challenges include adjusting to new social customs and norms, problems in making new social contacts and relationships, problems with both verbal and non-verbal communication and sometimes racial discrimination (Church, 1982; Hechanova-Alampay *et al.*, 2002).

A culture-learning approach stresses the importance of social interaction as a significant factor in enhancing sojourners' sociocultural adjustment (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016). However, some research has suggested that ISs' sociocultural adjustment was influenced by various variables. These include general or specific knowledge about a new culture (Ward and Searle, 1991; Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016); length of residence (Ward *et al.*, 1998); language or communication competence, and cultural distance between home and host country (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016); quantity and quality of contact with host-nationals (Bochner, 1982); friendship networks (Bochner *et al.*, 1977); cultural identity; acculturation

strategies (Ward and Kennedy, 1994); and cultural-training (Deshpande and Viswesvaran, 1992).

Based on the concept of the culture-learning approach, the initial stage of students' sojourn is considered the most difficult time for them since they lack adequate and proper knowledge and skills and have limited meaningful contact and relationships with the people of the host country (Ward *et al.*, 1998). Therefore, they have greater difficulties managing everyday social encounters. When students become familiar with the host society, the process of adjustment is developed when students engage social skills and learn through interacting with host nationals (Li and Gasser, 2005). According to the culture learning tradition, the acquisition of culture-specific skills would be predicted to follow a learning curve. A steep learning curve is expected at the beginning of the sojourn, before eventually levelling off over time (Ward *et al.*, 1998).

Overall, qualitative findings suggest that students reasonably adjusted well in the host environment. Students' sociocultural adjustment in this study seemed to be consistent with a study conducted by Ward and her colleagues (Ward and Kennedy, 2001). The data indicates that ISs struggled with all cultural challenges and difficulties the most at the entry point and decreased over time. Since the study was conducted with five different cohorts (Year 0 to Year 4 student groups), ranging from students who had been in the host country a few weeks to ones who had been there for a number of years across almost the degree programmes, the data gained from students in each group reveals some particular aspects or concerns students experienced in their sojourns.

Several students who had been longer in the host country gave more detailed comments on how their sociocultural adjustment improved when time progressed. They reported that the experience and opportunity of interacting with host nationals and immersing themselves in the host culture enhanced their sociocultural adjustment. The findings in this study are consistent with the findings found in a study conducted in Thailand. International university students who had spent several months gained more familiarity with the host environment, people, language and culture, leading to low levels of acculturative stress (Wei *et al.*, 2007; Vergara *et al.*, 2010). Thus, it can be concluded that length of residence plays an important role in students' sociocultural adjustment, which is linked to their psychological adjustment.

A study conducted with Malaysian and Singaporean students in New Zealand suggested that sociocultural adjustment problems commenced at the highest level upon entry to a new culture before steadily dropping off over six months, and then slightly dropping off but not significantly over a further six months (Ward and Kennedy, 1996). Another study conducted with Japanese students in New Zealand had similar results (Ward *et al.*, 1998).

Comments gained from the qualitative findings seemed to illustrate and capture clear detail in the process of students' adjustment. It could be summarised from the qualitative findings that students coped with their adjustment difficulties as time progressed and the problems arising from language seemed to level off over time.

The qualitative data analysis revealed clear and detailed comments on students' experiences of sociocultural adjustment. Factors which were repeatedly mentioned by students and that enriched students' adjustment over time in this study were cultural distance and friendship networks while the language barrier was an issue which persisted throughout the sojourn. The following sections will address the key factors which affected students' sociocultural adjustment found in this study.

### 7.2.1 *Cultural distance*

A number of students repeatedly expressed the view that there were several 'similarities' in various aspects between the home and host country. These included the staple foods, some aspects of the languages, and beliefs or religious influences. This is an interesting emergent finding and could be explained under the concept of 'cultural distance'. Black and Gregersen (1991) stated that the distance in cultures, rules, and social norms between home and host culture were significant factors that affected individuals' cultural adjustment. In this study, students claimed that the similarities between the two cultures made them adjust easier to the host culture. The finding in this study is in line with Jindal-Snape and Rienties's (2006) findings, and contributes to our understanding of how 'cultural distance' has an effect on students' transition. They proposed that international students with small cultural distances relative to host-national students have fewer transitional problems than students with large cultural distances.

The findings here revealed that among the similarities, the most obvious factors with regard to 'cultural distance' were connected to Buddhism and a Buddhist religious practice called 'making merit'. As several students mentioned that they were Buddhist, they felt connected to



the host culture. Even though Thai and Vietnamese people follow different sects of Buddhism, there is no difference when applying the main principles of Buddha's teaching to daily life. Vietnamese people have been influenced by Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. However, Buddhism and local beliefs are integrated and practised harmoniously by people of both countries (Srichampa, 2006). Making merit is a common Buddhist religious practice people do; therefore, students mentioned that they felt connected to Thai culture when they practiced 'making merit,' which could be conducted in several ways such as giving, showing generosity to others, helping others, offering food to monks at Buddhist temples, or practising meditation with Thai friends. A study conducted with Cambodian, Laotian, Burmese, and Vietnamese postgraduate students in Malaysian universities discovered that the majority of the participants were Buddhists. They revealed that they always "practiced the teaching of Buddha on how to live peacefully with others without the discrimination of religious belief, races, social classes, and political tendencies" (Sam *et al.*, 2013b, p. 17). The findings from Sam and her colleagues might be used to explain why students had reported at length on positive interactions with domestic friends and locals that were welcoming towards them. More than 95 percent of people in Thailand are Buddhist, with strong beliefs in Buddhism, although not all but most Thais believe that being helpful, nice and generous to others is considered as 'good deeds' and counted as ways of making merit. People of the host country might practice their religious beliefs through their acts in their daily lives, including welcoming people, so the VUs who had this experience spelled out their impression they had towards Thai people in the comments. Even though no students explicitly referred to this particular host city, it should be noted that the biggest Vietnamese community in Thailand is situated there (see 3.51). This could be a factor that made the students find it easier to adjust to the host environment.

Another interesting point emerged from the findings when the VUs compared the host and home country and frequently mentioned several good aspects they found in the people and culture of the host country. However, the students hardly expressed their favourable opinions on the host country explicitly in the sense that the host country is somehow 'better' or 'superior' to their home country. Rather, they proposed the idea of 'similarities' found between the two cultures. The phenomenon found in this study might be explained by a quotation made by Pham (1994). The quotation suggested that the way Vietnamese engage with others is influenced by the country's long history of striving for freedom and independence. This might lead to a characteristic of the Vietnamese, who have a great ability

to adapt and incorporate foreign influences and still maintain their strong sense of identity. Therefore, even though the students seemed to appreciate the positive cultural values of the host country, they nevertheless seemed to withhold their words:

The long domination by and later continued contacts with China, as well as recent involvements with the West have left many imprints on the Vietnamese culture, helping to sharpen a strong sense of identity and independence among the Vietnamese and attest to their adaptive abilities. (pp. 1-2).

Van Oudenhoven (2006) proposed that people from the same ethnic group but different cohorts or sub-groups might react differently in the sojourn. It has been found that Vietnamese ISs are reported to be protective of their cultural traditions compared to Vietnamese immigrants, who are reported to be more receptive to the changes demanded by the new culture. In the context of student sojourn, a study conducted with mainland Chinese students studying in Singapore found that in spite of their cultural similarities (mainland Chinese and Singapore Chinese), mainland Chinese students still needed to adjust in the new environment as there were many challenges and many aspects of life were different from what they experienced in their home country (Tsang, 2001).

In this study, 'cultural distance' played a role in students' sociocultural adjustment. However, it was not only a sole key factor contributing to the success of sojourn. A recent study conducted with ISs in Thailand reported that ISs from western cultures enjoyed the social and cultural environment and presented better cultural adjustment to Thai culture than Asian ISs. The study discussed that one of key factors which fostered better adjustment for western ISs was the pre-departure programme (Rujipak and Limprasert, 2016). Western ISs were educated and well-prepared to face difficulties when studying in Thailand. The study further discussed that interactions with host nationals was another crucial factor that cultivated a better adjustment of student sojourners in the new milieu. Thus, how great or close the 'cultural distance' between the two cultures might not be the case as long as the sojourners feel connected and welcomed in the host environment. This finding is consistent with a number of previous studies which have suggested that ISs may feel particularly comfortable living in the new environment when they feel welcomed and included by people of the host country (Hirai *et al.*, 2015). However, it is not surprising that well-prepared and open-minded students might show an inclination for faster, easier and better adjustment. Greater cultural distances between two cultures can be a great opportunity for ISs to acquire knowledge and perspectives which they cannot get from their backgrounds or cultures which are similar to theirs.

With regard to this study, it could be concluded that perceived close cultural distance between two cultures cannot guarantee international students' successful cultural adjustment. It should be noted that among different countries even though some are considered to hail from the same or a similar background, people of different countries have gone through different countries' histories and each country has its own unique features regarding customs, language, belief, style of living, etc. There are many other factors which play vital roles in individuals' sociocultural adjustment. In this study, the findings reveal that length of residence plays a role in students' sociocultural adjustment, as discussed in the previous section (see 6.3). Another crucial factor that contributes to students' smooth transition found in this study – friendship networks – will be discussed in the following section.

### ***7.2.2 Friendship networks***

With regard to data analysis, students' adjustment was immensely affected by social groups. Students overwhelmingly expressed positive views towards good friendship networks both with co-nationals and host nationals. Therefore, this section notes the extent of friendships between students and co-nationals and host nationals, inside and outside university.

#### *Friendship networks with co-nationals*

The findings in this study revealed that all students had friendship networks consisting mainly of co-nationals. Although they mentioned that they could build up good relationships with students from the host country, most students stated that their close friends were co-nationals, a finding in line with previous studies (Bochner *et al.*, 1977; Sudweeks *et al.*, 1990; Ying, 2002). Findings from this study indicated that co-national friendships could serve as important bonds for ISs; students could operate and learn from peers, so this circle of friendships helped enhance their cultural learning (Bochner *et al.*, 1977). Since students were exposed to the new culture, they could have discussions, exchange experiences and share feelings and emotions with other students who had experienced or were experiencing similar situations in a new academic or unfamiliar living environment (Woolf, 2007). In the study, a number of students mentioned that apart from the orientation programme offered by the university, senior students gave them advice on how to socially and academically adjust to the host environment. A benefit of having strong friendships with co-nationals was that it helped enhance the self-esteem of ISs (Al-Sharideh and Goe, 1998).

A comment emerged from a student was that she preferred to be only with peers from the home country. Findings from this study revealed that most VUs seemed to balance well in having friends from the host and home countries but this particular comment is worth discussing. Although strong friendships with co-nationals could provide a feeling of cultural identity and offer emotional support (Maudeni, 2001), having only friends from the host country might disadvantage the students in terms of language acquisition and cultural knowledge (Brown, 2009). Kim (2001) theorises that extensive and prolonged participation in co-national activities hinders the long-term adaptation process, further noting that the more time students have interpersonal communication with co-nationals, the less intercultural transformation those students attain. On the other hand, students who engage more with host national communication activities acquire more communication competence and have better development in intercultural transformation. Thus, Kim's theory argues that friendships with people of the host country seem to be important for the adjustment process.

#### *Friendship networks with host-nationals*

Students overwhelmingly had positive comments on having interactions with domestic students as well as locals from the host country, stating that Thai friends helped them adjust well to the host academic, social and cultural environment. Findings from this study are relevant and support a culture-learning approach as it is assumed that social interactions with host nationals is the key to sociocultural adjustment (Ward and Kennedy, 2001).

Sources of friendship networks with host nationals were in and out of the university. Starting from friendship networks on campus or in the university, the findings in this study indicated that it was not difficult for students to make friends from the host country. This result contrasts with a large number of studies undertaken in universities in English-speaking countries and which revealed that forming friendships with domestic students was challenging and rare. For example, a study conducted by Williams and Johnson (2011) to investigate the relationship between American and ISs found that ISs encountered substantial difficulty in trying to befriend American students. They concluded that:

Difficulties establishing friendships are exacerbated when the context of adjustment is marked by prejudicial attitudes or a history of problematic intercultural relations. (p.41)

A similar finding was reported in a study by Young et al. (2013), where international postgraduate students at a UK university reported a lack of contact with British people and that it was hard to have British student as friends (Schartner, 2015). The study had a similar

result in suggesting that ISs had substantial social contact with co-nationals and multi-nationals vis-à-vis host-nationals.

Findings in this study showed that students formed friendship networks with co-nationals and host-nationals in shared accommodation. The finding was similar to those in a study conducted at a UK university by (Sercombe and Young, 2015), who referred to this group of network as ‘co-habitees’. However, in Sercombe and Young’s work, the university hosted multicultural students while in this study there were only two groups of students: host and ISs. In this study, students on the preparative course were given accommodation provided by the university. Students were arranged to live with co-nationals whom they had not previously known before. However, many students reported that they formed and developed relationships with their Thai roommates and became close friends.

The top location to form friendship networks with domestic friends was in class. Since students studied with the domestic students and the language used in teaching, learning and assessment was Thai ISs were eager to improve their language as soon as possible because they were assessed in the language of the host country. This was a stimulus to establishing intra-class friendships.

Another source of networks on campus was through student union clubs. This finding emerged from a focus group discussion with Year 4 students. One of them mentioned that she had joined students’ clubs because she loved to learn by doing extra-curricular activities. A qualitative research conducted by Coles and Swami (2012) at a UK university suggested that student clubs were places which provided opportunities for ISs to integrate and meet local students.

Moving to sources of friendship networks outside university, several students mentioned that having a part-time job was a useful way to establish and maintain contact with host-nationals. Their work motives varied, but above of all it seemed that ISs were driven by a desire to have more contact with locals in order to practice Thai in authentic ways, which in return could be beneficial for his/her academic life. This helped him/her to have more effective communication with lecturers.

A salient comment raised by a student was that working part-time was a worthwhile experience and contributed to meaningful learning which she could not find in class. Others also pointed to the opportunity to be exposed to ‘real’ language used, including slang and

idioms that might not appear in an academic context, as well as learning to work with Thai people as several students aspired to work in the host country after graduation. The findings in this study are in line with Kim's theory (2001) that through interpersonal contact with host-nationals, ISs learn the standard and underlying messages in verbal and non-verbal communication along with cultural values of the new culture. They learn what is stressed, approved and disapproved of, and whether they realise it or not they rely on their social contacts to better interpret the messages and actions of others. Through these contact ISs gain insight into the mind and behaviours of locals (ibid.).

Another source of friendship network was via the host community. Although it was referred to by only one student, it is worth dwelling on. A student mentioned a religious community, and being a catholic and she joined and learnt the language, happily integrated and expanded her connections into the community. This finding is in line with a study conducted with eighty four ISs at the University of Hawaii, USA, which found that ISs with varying host-national friendships reported more often that they were significantly more satisfied and more socially connected (Hendrickson *et al.*, 2011). The findings are also consistent with previous research suggesting that non-academic activities had significance and affected other aspects of their lives, socially, culturally and academically (Sercombe and Young, 2015). In sum, the findings on friendship networks with host-nationals showed that meaningful contact and relationships benefited the students in their personal and academic endeavours.

In the next section, the discussion will be on language and communication, which was another key factor which hindered students' sociocultural adjustment in this study.

### ***7.2.3 Language and communication***

The findings showed that ISs regarded the language of the host country as the major barrier they would like to overcome as soon as possible. As time progressed, most students mentioned that their language proficiency improved. Most students felt more confident in their language ability at the T2 than at the T1 interview. Students felt more confident using the language to communicate both socially and academically and the findings from the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions confirmed that students' ability in using the language of the host country improved over time, which related to their better performance in studying. Time might not be the direct factor that resulted in students' development in language proficiency but it allowed students to be exposed to more opportunities to use the

language by engaging in a series of academic assessments which forced students to struggle to improve their language.

However, several complained that they still struggled with the language and the local dialect in daily life. The host language was a serious challenge for all students, particularly in the academic context since it was used in teaching-learning and assessment. Students from Year 0 groups had to pass the language requirement of standard scores set by the university in order to be eligible to apply to study at the host university while students from other groups found it more difficult according to the more difficult content of their studies. The language in the academic context and how it affects students' academic progress and adjustment will be focused on in the following chapter. This section will discuss how the proficiency of students' language related to their sociocultural adjustment.

The findings from the focus-groups revealed that some students mentioned that they did not understand Thai friends because they were not proficient enough in the host language. One student mentioned that she avoided speaking with Thai friends since she found her language was not good enough. This student seemed to lack confidence in her language proficiency.

Gudykunst *et al.* (1991) proposed that linguistic knowledge inhibited students from getting to know one another. This might explain the case of the student who loved to be only with friends from her host country, which limited her cultural learning and affected her long-term adaptation process, as discussed above. However, most students stated that their language ability improved over time. This might be because they studied with domestic students and all stated that they had good relationships and connections with students from the host country.

Several students mentioned that they struggled with the local dialect but it seemed not to be a serious problem since they had Thai friends to explain to them or they could asked the people from the host country to switch to standard Thai, the language they were more familiar with.

#### **7.2.4 Overview of students' sociocultural adjustment**

To summarise, findings from the focus groups largely supported the findings found from in interviews, suggesting that the most important factor which served to enhance students' sociocultural adjustment in this study was friendship networks, especially networks with host-nationals which helped to expand students' insights into and understanding of the host culture. Several students mentioned that similarities between the home and host country eased their

adjustment. The length of stay allowed students to be exposed to more opportunities in social and cultural experiences, which helped cultivate their sociocultural adjustment, while the major factor which hindered their adjustment was the language of the host country. All the major factors which contributed to students' sociocultural adjustment are summarised in the following figure.

The next chapter presents and discusses the qualitative findings on students' sociocultural adjustment.



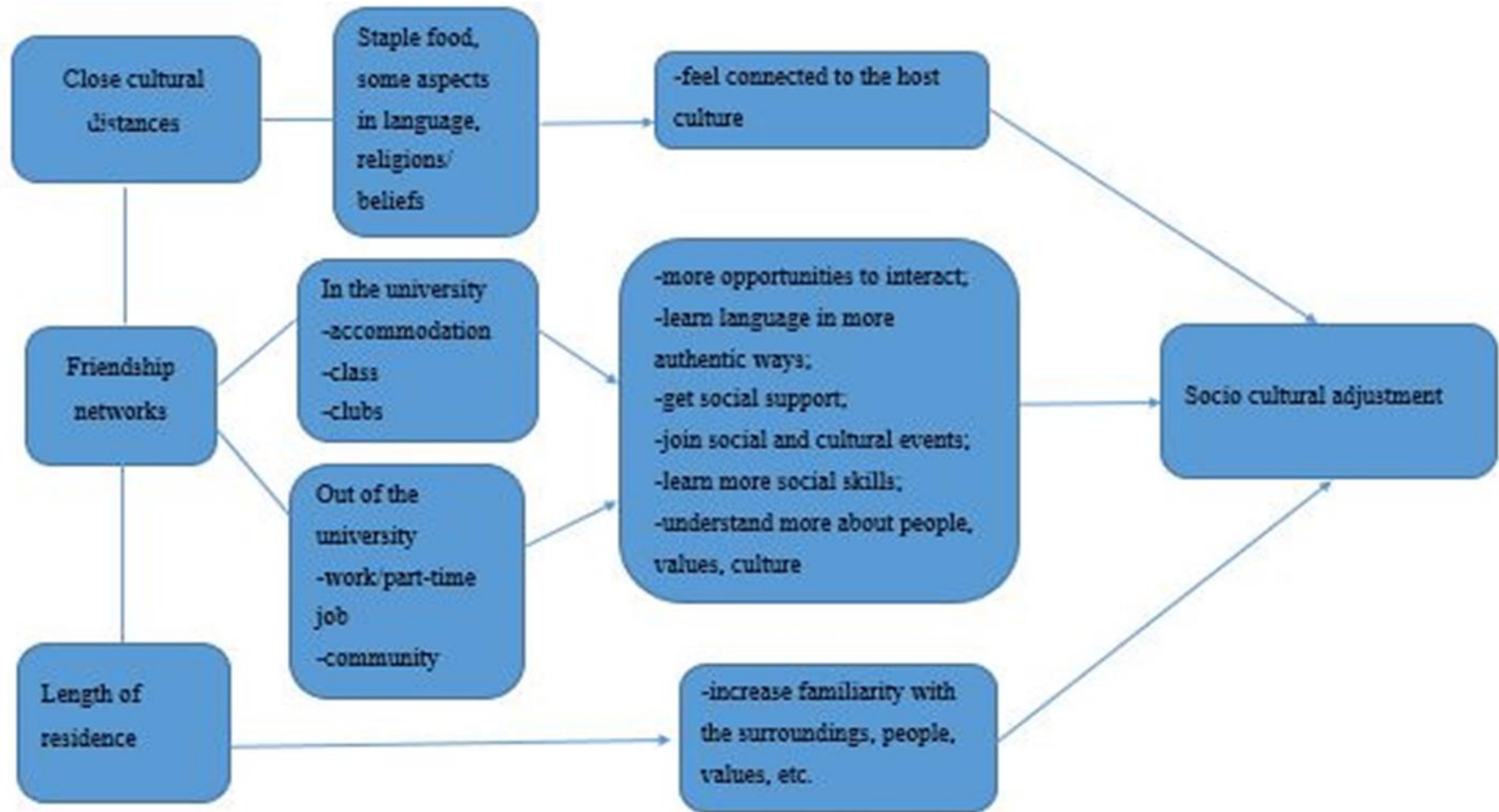


Figure 7.2 Summary of Factors Contributing to Students' Sociocultural Adjustment

### **7.3 Discussion of Students' Academic Adjustment over Time**

Analysis of the qualitative data gained from two rounds of semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with five cohorts of students illustrated a picture of students' academic adjustment process over time. Students from the five cohorts gave relevant comments that they experienced much of academic adjustment was difficult in the initial sojourn when they were not proficient in the host language. Academic Thai was a significant factor which had a great effect on their academic adjustment. This was because the Thai language was used as a medium of instruction and students' academic achievement was assessed through oral and written examinations. All ISs who were eligible to study in any degree programme had attended and met the demands of all the subjects studied in the preparative course as well as passed a Thai language test set by the host university. Year 0 students studied academic Thai while students in other years had already fulfilled the Thai language requirements set by their host university. As time progressed, students became familiar with the host university rules and conventions, including learning-teaching approaches and assessment. It seems that the more students were exposed to the host university setting, the more they became proficient in the language and necessary academic skills. When students' confidence in academic and linguistic abilities increased, they were more likely to effectively tackle academic difficulties and adjust well to a new academic setting. This is relevant to the culture-learning and social skill framework, which will be discussed in the next section.

#### ***7.3.1 Stress and coping framework***

The findings in this study suggest that students generally showed positive orientations regarding attitudes towards learning in a new academic setting. They used different types of coping strategies to manage their academic difficulties. The results of the study indicated that most students were likely to focus directly on the problem and take action to deal with it. This coping strategy matches the coping-focused strategy which was first proposed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in their Transactional Stress Coping Model. Problem-focused coping (or task-oriented strategies) occurs when an individual tries to focus on the problem and tries to manage or take action to solve it. Another coping strategy in their proposed model is known as 'emotion-focused coping.' This type of coping focuses on one's internal emotional reaction to a given stressful situation. According to the findings, students were likely to tackle academic problems by taking actions such as preparing for class, reviewing the lessons, and asking for academic support from lecturers and domestic peers.

These findings are partially in line with the results of a study recently conducted with 220 Asian international undergraduate students in the USA (Ra and Trusty, 2015). The study found that students tended to employ three different strategies: task-oriented, emotion-oriented, and avoidance coping strategies. The study concluded that Asian students who suffered from a lower acculturative stress (resulting in a better psychological adjustment) were the ones who had effective coping behaviours. Among the three coping strategies, focusing on finding solutions to the stressors or using task-oriented strategies (problem-focus coping) was held to be a better overall strategy (ibid.).

Another reason why students tended to use problem-focus coping might be explained by the cultural values they hold. These values are expressed in traditional Vietnamese proverbs such as “To fail is the mother of success” and “Take a rod of iron and keep filling it until it becomes a needle”. The two proverbs might explain the way students employed coping strategies to tackle academic difficulties, as to some extent Vietnamese people believe that people should not be discouraged easily but rather should try again and again to achieve success (Srichampa, 2006).

As noted above, the students’ grades were not so high. However, in this study, students’ academic adaptation was regarded as ‘positive,’ along with their academic adjustment. Successful academic performance does not necessarily guarantee an ideal academic adjustment, and a seemingly excellent student might lead a lonely life, concentrating only on his studies, in isolation from the host culture and lacking sound relationships (Klein, 1971). Therefore, this study observed students’ adjustment through the qualitative findings, which gave insights far beyond what the students’ grades can tell us. The findings from this study reported that students saw ‘ups and downs’ as a dynamic process in their ‘academic journey’ (Stier, 2003). In different phases of their learning experience, they met different challenges and they employed different types of coping strategies. Among all the comments, only one comment, made by a Year 4 student, mentioned the exact time she felt she could really adjust to the pace of learning (when she was in Year 2). This student’s comment suggests that it seems to have taken a while for her to feel confident in achieving a balance in her new academic environment. However, the pace of academic adjustment varied from student to student according to various factors such as an individual’s background or personal factors (Zhu, 2016).

### 7.3.2 *Culture-learning and social skills framework*

Findings indicate that students had positive impressions, expectations, experiences and performance for their academic adjustment over time even though they experienced academic difficulties initially. In accordance with the culture learning and social skill framework, students needed to have knowledge and the necessary learning skills to cope with conventions at the host university. Two important aspects of culture learning include having general knowledge about the host culture and being competent in intercultural communication (Yue and Le, 2012). In this study, students were prepared for the new language and basic knowledge related to the cultures of the host country by enrolling in the preparative course. In general, students' academic adjustment followed the learning curve in the culture learning model advocated by Furnham and Bochner (1986). The data gained from five cohorts of students confirms that students encountered most academic adjustment difficulties when they were not competent in the host language and were least familiar with conventions involving all various demands at the host university. This highlights the importance of the culture learning and social skill framework since academic adjustment is the process whereby student sojourners need to acquire culturally relevant social knowledge and skills in order to survive and thrive in a new academic environment (Ward *et al.*, 2001; Ward and Kennedy, 2001). Evidence from this study suggests that even though Thai and Vietnamese share socio-cultural similarities, including academic systems, they are not completely identical, as Jin and Cortazzi (1996, p. 215) note, "Every culture of learning offers an alternative perspective on how to do things academically". Academic adjustment in this study was observed through how students adjusted to the 'academic culture' of the host university. 'Academic culture' refers to cultural norms, the systems of beliefs, expectations, and cultural practices about how to perform academically (*ibid.*).

The findings further reveal that the extent to which students' culture learning and their social skills developed over time and length of stay in the host country was intimately related to their academic adjustment. With regard to length of stay in a foreign country, previous studies mainly aimed to explore the relationship and students' acculturative stress. A study conducted with 219 Kashmiri students who were studying in central India ranging from less than a year with 219 Kashmiri students who were studying in central India ranging from less than a year to up to 3 years found that students with a shorter length of stay experienced greater health problems (e.g. anxiety and insomnia) and acculturative stress (e.g. social dysfunction and severe depression) in comparison with those who had a longer duration of stay (Ayoob *et al.*, 2011). Similar findings were reported in a recent study conducted in Thailand by Vergara *et*

al. (2010), who found that length of time was associated with low levels of ISs' acculturative stress. Students who had for several months lived and studied in Thailand increased familiarity with their surroundings, culture and locals over time. Findings from these two studies support findings found in this current study, namely that academic surrounding and culture could also be regarded as a 'new environment' and that ISs need 'time' to acquire new knowledge and skills to cope with academic difficulties and demands as well. When students were capable of dealing with academic problems, they felt positive towards learning in the new environment, so they reported lower levels of acculturative stress, reflecting a positive academic adjustment.

In this study, students revealed that the longer time they stayed in the host country, the more likely they were to adapt to the new academic environment. Many students revealed that their grades gradually increased over time, suggesting that they were undergoing a positive academic adaptation. Students mentioned that they were satisfied with their grades because their grades were better than in the earlier years of their studies (see p. 98). In terms of academic adjustment, the qualitative data suggested that most students were positive and eager to learn, which indicated positive academic adjustment.

In order to be academically successful, students not only needed to acquire the skills necessary for learning but they also needed to manage academic stress and cope with it effectively, a factor which will be discussed in the following section.

### ***7.3.3 Issues concerning students' learning in the new academic setting***

According to the analysis of the data, it was found that there were issues concerning students' learning emerging from the data which covered students' expectations towards lecturers' roles, teaching-learning approaches, the need for a two-sided adjustment, online social media, and proficiency in the local language.

#### ***Students' expectations towards lecturers' roles***

The findings indicated that several students highlighted the differences between approaches to lecturers' roles which gave a fine-grained understanding of cross-cultural teaching and learning. Based on a broad range of cultural dimensions categorised by (Hofstede, 1984), Thai and Vietnamese academic cultures can be categorised in the same cultural group, i.e. large power distance or collectivistic cultures which could result in similar practices in lecturer-student relationship. According to these categories, the lecturer is a transmitter of knowledge and the student pays high respect to him or her. A perception and image generally of Asian

students is that they are passive and ‘surface’ learners who rely on rote learning which is then reproduced to show that they have understood the lecture (Subramaniam, 2008; Trần, 2013).

However, a recent study conducted by Trần contradicted this assertion and criticised the outdated label put on Asian students who hail from a Confucian heritage culture as overly restrictive and simplistic. Trần further proposed that students might be regarded as obedient or passive sometimes, in certain cases, but there were various factors underpinning and driving the teaching-learning approaches, such as the education management system, a heavy learning curriculum, limited resources apart from text books, the quantity and quality of lecturers. This is in line with Littlewood (2000), who suggested that a ‘passive learning style’ was more likely to be a product of the educational context rather than of any inherent dispositions of the students themselves. Littlewood undertook a study with students in eight Asian countries (including Thailand and Vietnam) and three European countries to examine some common preconceptions about Asian students and their learning attitudes, in particular the belief that they see the teacher as an authority figure whose ‘wisdom and knowledge’ should not be questioned. Interestingly, the students’ responses revealed that there were actually fewer differences in attitudes to learning between students from Asian and European countries than between individuals within each country. The results suggested that Asian students did not regard lecturers as an authority, they dared to ask questions, and they wanted to explore knowledge themselves and find their own answers. The findings from this study support Littlewood’s work since the students presented themselves as active and motivated to learn and they dared to ask questions. The findings here are also in line with Trần’s work (2014), which suggested that Vietnamese students perform actively in learning when given the chance. With enough support from domestic peers and lecturers, students actively were engaged and effectively developed their academic and social skills over time and thus overcame learning difficulties, resulting in a positive academic adjustment.

#### *Teaching-learning approaches and group work*

According to the findings, the ISs were informed early in the preparative course about the academic requirements of the host university. They were informed that ISs are expected to perform in and are assessed against the conventions of the host university’s values and practices (McLean and Ransom, 2005). In order to handle the academic demands, they needed to develop relationships with lecturers and become accustomed to the learning and teaching approaches of the host university (Valka, 2015).

With regard to approaches in teaching and learning, the findings indicated that the students had positive attitudes to doing group work. It was noted numerous times that they learnt through group work because it compelled them to engage, interact and employ the language academically with home students. This finding concurs with a recent comparative study exploring learning styles and teaching techniques between Thai and Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language Learners and instructors, which revealed that the most preferred learning style rated by students from both countries was an active learning style which was closely related to group work (Srichampa, 2006). According to this style of learning, students like to talk or explain things. They feel more comfortable with activities and can work well in groups. Similarly, the students in this study made positive comments on group work since it seemed to match their learning style. They reported that they enjoyed studying in groups and they understood the lessons better.

#### *The need for two-sided adjustment*

One interesting piece of data which emerged from comments on the Buddhism course was that it seemed to be one of the most difficult subjects for them. It is not surprising that students would struggle with this course given that the content, especially regarding the history of Buddhism, entailed learning difficult and long terms and proper names in Sanskrit and Pali, two archaic languages used in Buddhism scriptures. The ISs mentioned that Vietnamese people have the freedom to practice any religion but they did not have to study it at school, and understandable observation given that Vietnam is still, at least notionally, a socialist country where religious beliefs are a historical legacy and not something taught in schools.

Based on the students' comments about course on Buddhism they were taking, further research found that there was in fact no compulsory course entitled 'Buddhism' on the Bachelor degree programmes at the host university. Instead, students had to choose one from two courses related to religion and morality: i.) Morality for living, and; ii.) Religion for living (see Appendix D). It transpires that Buddhism is the predominant content selected by the lecturer to deliver the Religion for living class. It could be understood in many reasons why this is the case but the overarching one is that more than 95% of the population of Thailand are Buddhist, and Buddhism is deeply rooted in Thai culture and people's psyche, as can be seen in the following quote by Warea (2015, p. 125):

The way of life and culture of Thai people has been instructed by Buddhist teaching since the first establishment of Thailand.

Consequently, having formal, structured knowledge of Buddhism might be expected to facilitate students' understanding of Thai people and culture. However, the students' reflections on the difficult content of the subject should be taken into consideration despite the fact that they were studying on the general Thai National Programme, which requires them to adjust to the host university's academic demands (i.e. they were being treated the same as local students in terms of assessment and aspects of teaching and learning). However, for the sake of better and more effective courses on offer to students, the contents of any course and teaching/learning approaches should be developed in a reciprocal manner.

It is undeniable that having local and ISs study together has brought changes to the host university in terms of bringing into the classroom an intercultural environment. In light of the findings of this study, it would seem pertinent for the university, in considering this fact, to have in place practical strategies to deal with these organic changes. In other words, a one-sided adjustment by ISs to the dominant host culture seems to be inadequate, and the cause of minor irritation: the host university needs to adjust to the ISs just as the latter do to the former. Developing courses is a way that the host university should invest to raise teaching quality. For example, the courses may be redesigned, making it easier to link the content to students' backgrounds. Instead of offering content only on the Theravada school, which is the main Buddhist sect in Thailand, content related to the Mahayana school should be integrated so Thai and Vietnamese students would learn from the differences.

#### Online social networks

It is noteworthy to mention that several students used Facebook as a channel for communication, interaction and cooperation with family members, friends and lecturers. Findings revealed that VUs used Facebook as a source for language learning, supporting Yu *et al.* (2010) in their claim that social networks can enhance formal learning and also assist students in adapting to the host university culture. Students mentioned a closed-group for Vietnamese students on Facebook that the university had created in order to keep up with students' needs, interests and demands. This study found that VUs read status updates posted in Thai and also even responded in Thai, indicating how this online social network can "enhance [students'] informal learning and become part of the educational ecosystem of students" (Akbari *et al.*, 2015).

#### Proficiency in language.

As noted in numerous places above, language issues were a constant factor mentioned by students with reference to their academic adjustment. Lack of Thai proficiency was a major



concern faced by the ISs in this study. This cannot be surprising since without proficiency in the language of instruction, students are unable to fully follow lectures, take notes, or ask questions. Based on a study by Lewthwaite (1996), one of the main frustrations ISs face comes from lacking confidence in the language of instruction precisely because this affects their contribution inside the classroom. However, concurring with other studies which have addressed this issue, the findings here revealed that as time progressed, the students developed their language skills, in particular academic Thai, and so this obstacle to academic adjustment lessened with time (Rujipak, 2016).

#### ***7.3.4 Overview of students' academic adjustment***

This section has presented and discussed students' academic adjustment. It was found that the focus groups largely confirmed the findings of the interviews indicating that students' academic achievements improved over time. Support from friends and classmates played a key role in ensuring successful academic adjustment. Group work was beneficial and matched students' preferred learning styles. Self-regulated learning, using social media (in this case Facebook) could also enhance students' learning. Academic language ability was considered the most significant concern, followed by the difficult content of a number of courses. The summary of factors affecting students' academic adjustment is summarised in the following figure:

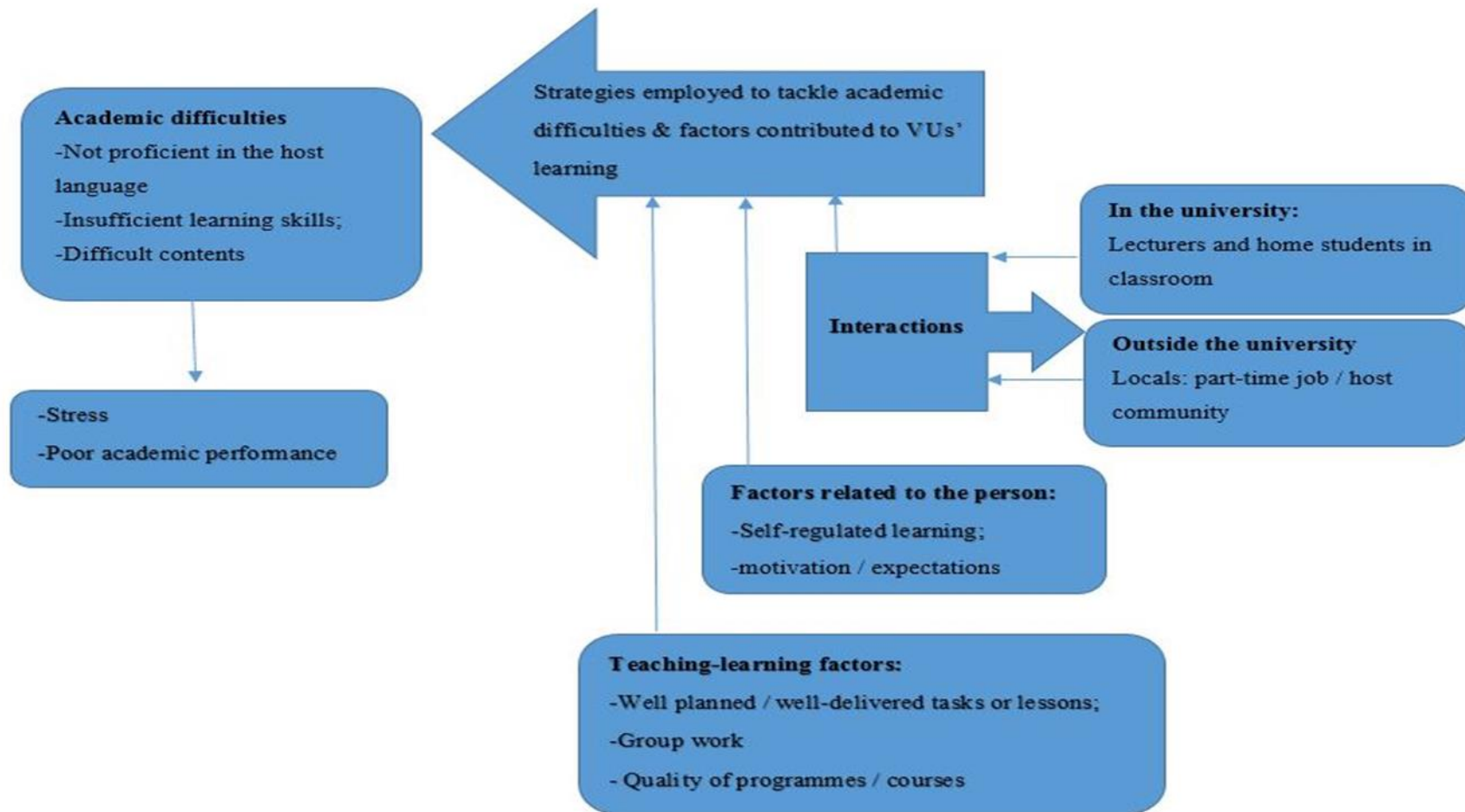


Figure 7.3 Summary of Factors Affecting Students' Academic Adjustment

## Chapter 8. Conclusion

This chapter provides a brief summary of the study (8.1), its key findings (section 8.2), contributions (8.3), limitations (section 8.4), recommendations for future research (8.5), and concluding remarks (8.6).

### 8.1 Summary of the Study

This study focused on the adaptation and process of adjustment of a group of 40 Vietnamese Undergraduate students (20 male, 20 female) who were studying at a higher education institution in Thailand. The research was conducted over a six-month period to investigate three main areas of students' adaptation and adjustment: psychological, sociocultural and academic. To attain this purpose, a quasi-longitudinal study employed a multiple-methods approach to gather qualitative data through semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The data was collected from four groups of students who were enrolled on Bachelor Degree programmes in General Management Science, Science, and Technology, and one group of students who were attending a preparative course at one of Thailand's fastest growing universities located in the north eastern part of Thailand.

The stress and coping theories and culture and learning theories from the affect-behaviour-cognition (ABC) model proposed by Ward *et al.* (2001) were used as theoretical perspectives to investigate the students' adaptation and adjustment.

Three main research questions were set:

1. How do Vietnamese international undergraduate students experience the processes of psychological adjustment ;
2. How do Vietnamese international undergraduate students experience the processes of sociocultural adjustment ;
3. How do Vietnamese international undergraduate students experience the processes of psychological adjustment at a Thai HE institution?

The study also aimed to answer the following sub-questions:

- Is there a relationship between length of residence in the host country and students' adaptation and adjustment?
- What are students' challenges or difficulties in the three domains of students' adjustment?

- How do students overcome difficulties they experience in their sojourn?

## 8.2 Main Findings

The research question was answered by the qualitative findings and the data dealing with each domain of students' adjustment was presented separately (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6).

Starting with psychological adjustment, the overall findings indicated that students were optimistic and satisfied with their lives and quite well-adjusted in the host country. Students' psychological adjustment was adjusted according to academic calendar. Students felt most academic anxiety and stress due to exams, assignments and study in general (Selby and Woods, 1966; Tolmie *et al.*, 2011). The research affirms the results found from a previous study that students are able to overcome psychological difficulties if they receive good general support and the degree and quality of social relationships can lessen students' stress and result in higher levels of PWB (Young *et al.*, 2013). Students employed various coping strategies to alleviate their worries, including developing social contacts and support from friends, family and lecturers, doing recreational activities and exercise, and having positive self-beliefs, etc. (see Figure 4.3). One interesting finding which emerged from students' coping strategy was 'making merit', a common Buddhist practice which is culturally specific. Students utilised 'making merit' as a stress coping strategy (Chai *et al.*, 2012).

With regards to students' sociocultural adjustment, the findings from the focus groups largely supported the findings found from the interviews in suggesting that the most important factor which served to enhance students' sociocultural adjustment in this study was friendship networks. Networks with host-nationals played an important role, helping to expand students' insights into and understandings of the host culture. Students found that a similar culture between the home and the host country eased their adjustment, a factor explained under the concept of 'cultural distance' (Jindal-Snape and Rienties, 2016).

Interestingly, practicing culturally specific activities such as making merit and visiting Buddhist temples with Thai friends were social activities which fostered students' sociocultural adjustment as well as their psychological adjustment, as noted in the previous section. This finding contributes to our knowledge that 'making merit' can be employed as a stress-coping strategy and a social activity which helps students to alleviate stress and enhance their sociocultural adjustment. These findings highlight the importance of considering cultural aspects in studying the processes of individuals' adjustment. The length of students' stay also had a significant impact on their adjustment, as the longer the students

stayed in the host country, the better they socioculturally adjusted (Ward *et al.*, 1998). It was also found that proficiency in the language of the host country was a major factor that facilitated or hindered students' sociocultural adjustment.

In the last domain—academic adjustment—it was found that students' academic adjustment and students' academic achievements improved over time. The longer they studied in the host country, the better grades they had. Based on these findings, students coped with academic problems by taking action such as preparing for class, reviewing the lessons, and asking for academic support from lecturers and domestic peers, all of which were regarded as problem-focused coping or task-oriented strategies (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

Support from classmates played a key role in ensuring successful academic adjustment. Students found group work both enjoyable and beneficial as it enhanced their academic adjustment. They struggled and experienced difficulties in learning the most when they were not proficient in Thai. Students coped with academic problems by having self-regulated learning. They learnt the host language by using social media (in this case, Facebook) to read and respond to Thai posts. These findings also indicated the major concern which hindered students' academic adjustment was Thai language proficiency.

The overall view of VUs' adaptation and adjustment derived from the findings indicates that ISs' adaptation and adjustment in the three domains are interconnected and overlapping.

### **8.3 Contributions**

The primary purpose of this research is to explore an area of cross-cultural research in higher education where limited knowledge exists, namely, Vietnamese international students' adaptation and adjustment at an institution of higher education in Thailand.

#### **8.3.1 Theoretical contributions**

This study contributes to cross-cultural research on ISs' adaptation and adjustment experience in several respects.

First, it fills a number of research gaps in cross-cultural research. The study invests the phenomenon in a new setting. There is a scant research on ISs' adjustment in non-English language countries, and little, if any, on adjustment and adaptation to non-western contexts. The study gives a fine-grained view on ISs in an “intra-Asian” dimension. The study area in psychological, sociocultural and academic adaptation and adjustment of ISs has not been

investigated before in this region. Thus, this research can be considered novel in any of the SE Asian countries.

Second, most studies completed in the field of ISs' adaptation and adjustment have focused on ISs who study in the countries which are very culturally different from their own. This present study has attempted to investigate the adaptation and adjustment experiences of ISs who had travelled to study in their *geographic home region*. Only a limited number of studies have explored ISs studying in a host country quite similar to their own in terms of cultural values (McClure, 2007). Thailand and Vietnam are situated in the same region—South East Asia—so these two countries share a number of cultural values. However, although in some respects similar, these two countries are also different in other aspects, not least of which is language, and thus the VUs still faced significant challenges and obstacles when settling into their new learning environment.

Third, most of the research in this area has been conducted in western countries where English is used as a medium of instruction. In contrast, Thai is the language of the host country and it is used as a medium in teaching and learning, and so the VUs in this study had decided to study under the general Thai National Programme. No prior research has been published on how the Thai language influences ISs' adjustment, a factor which was a key goal of this study to explore.

Fourth, this study utilised coping theories and culture and learning theories from the affect-behaviour-cognition (ABC) model proposed by Ward *et al.* (2001) to investigate the students' adaptation and adjustment. The findings stress the importance of stress and different coping strategies students employed to deal with difficulties encountered in different domains (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). It was confirmed that students encountered most adjustment difficulties when they were not competent in the host language and were least familiar with the host environment. The results highlight the importance of the culture learning and social skill framework, which posits that student sojourners need to acquire culturally relevant social knowledge and skills in order to survive and thrive in a new environment (Ward *et al.*, 2001; Ward and Kennedy, 2001).

### 8.3.2 *Methodological contributions*

In terms of methodological contribution, this study deployed a novel longitudinal element: a quasi-longitudinal study to gauge the experiences of students with varying lengths of stay in the host country (see Table 3.1 and Figure 3.3). Such a timeframe has not been used in any

prior studies of ISs, making the study methodologically innovative. Contributions to knowledge about methodology can also be claimed as the same or a similar framework could in future be applied to conduct studies with other SE Asian students studying in Thailand (Schartner and Young, 2016).

### 8.3.3 *Practical contributions*

In terms of practical contribution, the study provides in-depth detail on the processes of the participants' psychological, sociocultural and academic adaptation and adjustment, thereby contributing valuable insights which could be utilised in guidelines for HE institutions in making policies and planning to accommodate ISs upon their arrival and during their stay at education institutions in Thailand. This can be considered a way to raise the quality and attractiveness of higher education institutions in Thailand.

There are several significant implications arising from the findings from the three different domains of adaptation and adjustment and which are applicable to teaching, learning and administration. The findings can be used as a guidelines leading to the implications for academic quality and language / education policy in internationalisation of HE in Thailand.

#### *Implications for student services*

Even though the findings indicated that only some students had several mild to medium degrees of stress and anxiety, with most of the students showing no undue psychological stress, it nevertheless showed that students experienced difficulties that affected their well-being. Therefore, it is necessary to provide effective campus counselling services for ISs. As Carr *et al.* (2003, p. 133) advise, "College health professionals need to adopt various helping roles, including being counsellor, advisors, advocates, resource persons, mentors and facilitators." It is important to undertake efforts to help ISs feel comfortable in seeking professional help as and when needed.

The findings revealed that the orientation programme offered to ISs by the university was beneficial since they were advised on how to socially and academically adjust to the host environment, including the campus and the wider city. In the orientation programme, ISs should be informed of the various support services on campus that they can access for their benefit, such as funding options and counselling services.

### *Implications for academic quality in teaching and learning and language*

The qualitative findings on ISSs' academic adaptation and adjustment gave a fine-grained understanding of cross-cultural teaching and learning. An issue concerning the Buddhism course implies that it needs to be developed or redesigned and delivered with a more effective teaching and learning approach. As McLaughlin (1995, pp. 112 as cited in Campbell and Li, 2008) emphasises, it is "professionally irresponsible" to assume that only ISSs have to adapt or adjust to the academic demands while academics insist on maintaining their positions. The finding has alerted the host university to the need for two-sided adjustment (see 7.3.3). Faculty and staff development is necessary because it helps enhance the quality of education.

Language was noted as the major concern that hindered students' adaptation and adjustment in the three domains. In view of this, the host university should provide additional opportunities to help ISSs develop their language skills, especially academic language, which is crucial for academic success. This could be done by organising Thai language workshops or writing seminars. The university can support students by providing a Thai language centre or drop-in service where students can get consultation to improve their academic language.

### *Implications for education policy in internationalisation of HE in Thailand*

The findings of this small scale research reveal that the location of the host university is one of the foreign students' major factors in making decision to study. This finding is relevant to a recent study conducted with foreign students in Thailand which indicated that institutional prestige, programmes of study and location are the first three factors that influence students' decisions when considering studying in Thailand (Kamolpun, 2015). The institutions located closer to international borders attract more students from neighbouring countries (ibid.). Laotian and Vietnamese students attend various HE institutions located in the north-eastern region of Thailand whereas the HE institutions located in northern and eastern parts attract more students from Myanmar and Cambodia. The data in this study indicated that one reason that made the participants better socially adjusted were similar aspects of culture they found in the host environment as in their home country. At the university level, the host university and other HE institutions could take this opportunity as a potential marketing strategy to promote their programmes and universities to attract foreign students who are from the border areas.

Another feature gained from the findings of this study is that the students participated in the programmes which Thai was used as a medium of instruction. Students who would like to attend programmes conducted in Thai have to pass a Thai language test set by the host



universities, unlike international students who attend universities in western universities, where standardised language proficiency tests such as TOEFL or IELTS are used. As HE institutions have the potential to recruit international students to enrol on programmes offered in Thai, it is thus imperative and necessary for the Ministry of Education to consider to developing a Thai language proficiency test to be used as a standardised test for international students nationwide, a proposal which could aid HE intuitions in their admission processes.

#### **8.4 Limitations and Recommendations**

A number of limitations to this study need to be considered. First, the most obvious limitation was the scope of the study, involving as it did only 40 VUs at a regional university in Thailand. Due to this relatively small sample size, the results might be limited in regard to any extrapolation to VUs at other universities but it provided in-depth students' voice on their processes of adjustment. Second, due to the limited time budget, no observations were conducted to obtain data as a longitudinal study by investigating students' adjustment from the beginning the programme until they had completed their studies, which would clearly have offered a fuller picture of students' processes of adjustment. Third, the study did not obtain data from lecturers, staff, and domestic students or senior students on how they enhanced VUs' adjustment since it was beyond the scope of the study. Data gained from these groups in the academic environment might have provided a more comprehensive view on the processes of VUs' adjustment.

These limitations can help guide and structure further studies, as shown in the next section.

#### **8.5 Recommendations for Further Studies**

The findings of the study have provided evidence confirming that the cultural background of VUs influences their processes of adaptation and adjustment experiences in Thailand. It has shown that even though Thailand and Vietnamese are considered culturally 'similar' in certain aspects (in addition to being located in the same region of the world), in other aspects that affect their peoples the two countries are markedly different. This study has identified a range of factors that appear to have had strong influences on the processes of adaptation and adjustment on this group of students. Thus, it should not be taken for granted that ISs from neighbouring countries who make the relatively short journey to Thailand will easily adjust simply because they are from the same region. Thus, further opportunities to investigate other groups of ISs in Thailand, especially those from SE Asian countries, would be useful. The

information garnered could be used to assist lecturers and administrators in facilitating those students. Further research incorporating a similar instrument and larger sample size would be of value in terms of more widely generalizable results. Longitudinal research designs should also be conducted to gain clearer understandings of this complex phenomenon.

## **8.6 Concluding Remarks**

This study sheds lights on the adaptation and processes of adjustment of Vietnamese undergraduate students (VUs) studying at a higher education institution in Thailand. Students encountered several challenges in their transition and needed support to overcome their difficulties.

The findings revealed that ISSs' experiences involved many factors which could facilitate their smooth transition and successful adjustment. These factors included the home students, staff, and institutional policies and its support services. Regarding these significant findings, there is a need for two-sided adjustment to be implemented.

It is also hoped that the findings will be applied and taken into consideration by policy makers, administrators, lecturers and staff in implementing policy, strategies, and teaching-learning approaches which might foster students' successful social, cultural and academic adjustment when studying in Thailand.

I also hope that my doctoral thesis has made a small contribution by providing beneficial information that can be practically applied to enrich the quality of HE in Thailand.

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## Appendix A



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**Title of Research Project:** Factors contributing to successful process of international students' psychological, sociocultural and academic adjustment at a Thai HE institution

**Researcher:** Nattaya Srisakda, School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences, Newcastle University.

#### **Participant selection and purpose of study:**

My name is Nattaya Srisakda and I am a PhD student at Newcastle University in Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom. I am conducting a research entitled 'Factors contributing to successful process of international student's psychological, sociocultural and academic adjustment in a Thai university' under the supervision of Dr Tony Young. You are invited to participate in the study which aims to investigate factors facilitating successful adjustment of undergraduate international students (ISs) and how they adjust themselves when studying at a higher education institution in Thailand.

#### **What your participation will involve: If you are willing to participate, you will;**

1. Be asked to complete the questionnaire at the beginning and the end of the first and second semesters.
2. Be asked to allow the researcher to access to their grade point average (G.P.A) for the purpose of the research study.
3. Be asked to have voluntarily interviews.

#### **Confidentiality and disclosure of information:**

All data obtained as above will be confidential to the researcher and they will be used solely for research purposes. In any research report, publication or information will be provided in such a way that no participant can be identified by name, affiliation, article submission ID or any form of information that can be tracked to the participant.

**Feedback to participants:** At the completion of the study, all participants will be most welcome to consult the research findings.

**Your consent:** All of the information collected during this study, including any information that directly links you to the study, or identities you will be kept confidential. Should you decide not to participate in this study, your grade in the course will neither be affected. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without prejudice. If you have any additional inquiries concerning the research project, the researcher, Nattaya Srisakda, will be happy to discuss these with you. She can be reached at: [n.srisakda@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:n.srisakda@ncl.ac.uk).

## Appendix B



### INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH TITLE: Factors contributing to successful process of international students' psychological, sociocultural and academic adjustment in a Thai university

I, the undersigned, confirm that (please x the box and choose the option as appropriate):

1.	I voluntarily agree to participate in a research project conducted by Ms. Nattaya Srisakda from Newcastle University. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about international students' adjustment in a Thai university. I have read and understood the information about the research, as provided in the Participant Information Sheet.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	I can decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time for any reason and I will not be penalised for withdrawing.	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	I have been clearly explained about procedures and confidentiality (e.g. use of names, pseudonyms, anonymisation of data, etc.) in advance before I participate in this project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	If applicable, I have been explained and provided separate terms of consent for questionnaires, interviews, or other forms of data collection that are employed in this project.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6.	I has been explained about the use of the data in research, publications, sharing and archiving.	<input type="checkbox"/>
7.	I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the data and if they agree to the terms I have specified in this form.	<input type="checkbox"/>
8.	I understand that for purposes of ethical protection, the researcher will use pseudonyms in the analysis and description of the data for what I have said or written as part of this study. They data can be used in reports, publications and other research outputs so that anything I have contributed to this project can be recognised.	<input type="checkbox"/>
9.	I voluntarily to: answer the questionnaire survey be a participant in semi-structured interviews be a participant in focus-group discussion	<input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/> <input type="checkbox"/>
9.	I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this informed consent form.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Participant: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant
Signature
Date

Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_  
Name
Signature
Date

## Appendix C

### Courses provided in the curriculum at the host university

คู่มือหลักสูตรและแผนการเรียน

การจัดการศึกษารูปแบบพิเศษ2560

รายวิชาหลักสูตรปรับปรุง ( ปี 2559)

1. กลุ่มวิชาภาษาศาสตร์ เรียนไม่ต่ำกว่า 9 หน่วยกิตดังนี้
  - 1.1 ภาษาไทย เลือก 1 วิชา จากรายวิชา ดังต่อไปนี้
    - GE 10001 ภาษาไทยเพื่อการสื่อสาร 3(3-0-6)  
Thai for Communication
    - GE 10004 สุนทรียภาพในภาษาไทย 3(3-0-6)  
Aesthetic in Thai Language
  - 1.2 ทักษะการฟัง-พูด ภาษาอังกฤษ เลือก 1 วิชา จากรายวิชา ดังต่อไปนี้
    - GE 10002 ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสาร 3(3-0-6)  
English for Communication
    - GE 10005 ภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อการสื่อสารเพื่อการสื่อสารในสถานการณ์เฉพาะหน้า 3(3-0-6)  
Communicative English in Impromptu Situations
  - 1.3 ทักษะการฟัง-พูด ภาษาอังกฤษ เลือก 1 วิชา จากรายวิชา ดังต่อไปนี้
    - GE10003 การอ่านและการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อจุดประสงค์ทั่วไป 3(3-0-6)  
Reading and Writing English for General Purposes
    - GE 10006 การอ่านและการเขียนภาษาอังกฤษเพื่อนำไปใช้ 3(3-0-6)  
English reading and Writing in Use
2. กลุ่มวิชามนุษยศาสตร์ เรียนไม่ต่ำกว่า 9 หน่วยกิตดังนี้
  - 2.1 จริยธรรม เลือก 1 วิชา จากรายวิชา ดังต่อไปนี้
    - GE20001 จริยธรรมเพื่อการดำรงชีวิต 2(1-2-3)  
Morality for living
    - GE20005 ศาสนาเพื่อการดำรงชีวิต 2(1-2-3)  
Religions for Living
  - 2.2 สุนทรียศาสตร์
    - GE20002 สุนทรียภาพเพื่อชีวิต 3(3-0-6)  
Aesthetics for Life
    - GE20006 สุนทรียภาพในอีสาน 3(3-0-6)  
Aesthetics in Isan
  - 2.3 ทักษะชีวิต เลือก 1 วิชา จากรายวิชา ดังต่อไปนี้
    - GE20003 พฤติกรรมมนุษย์เพื่อการพัฒนาคน 2(1-2-3)  
Human Behaviour for Self-Development

## Appendix D

### Sample questions from semi-structured interviews and focused-groups

#### *Questions in psychological adjustment domain:*

Major questions: How are you feeling these days? / How are you feeling?

Are you feeling ok?

Sub-questions: *Have you had fun? / Are you homesick?*

*What do you do to relax yourself? What makes you feel good?*

#### *Questions in sociocultural adjustment domain:*

Major questions: How are things going socially? / How are things going for you in Thailand?

Sub-questions: *Can you make friends with local people?*

*Can you use the transport system?*

*Can you eat the local food?*

#### *Questions in academic adjustment domain:*

Major question: How are things going for your studies?

Sub-questions: *Please tell me the challenges or problems when you are studying here?*

*What challenges you have experienced in learning?*

*What helps you to overcome learning problems?*

*How can you solve your academic problems?*

*Which subject is the most difficult for you?*

## Appendix E

### Sample Interview transcripts from a semi-structured interview (Time 1) with Phu, a Year 1 student.

Date 17 September 2014

Original Transcript (Thai)	Translated Version
<p>R: ช่วยกรุณาแนะนำตนเองตนเองบอกชื่อและสิ่งที่กำลังศึกษาตอนนี้ค่ะ</p> <p>ST: สวัสดีครับ ชื่อ ภู (นามสมมุติ) ตอนนี้กำลังศึกษาอยู่ชั้นปีที่ 1 เอกการท่องเที่ยว</p> <p>R: นี่เป็นการสัมภาษณ์ครั้งที่ นะคะ ตอนนี้รู้สึกยังไงบ้าง</p> <p>ST: ตอนนี้ก็รู้สึกมีความสุขดี เมื่อวานสนุกมากครับ ได้เรียนภาษาไทยกับครูไทย</p> <p>R: อะไรที่ทำให้รู้สึกมีความสุขคะ</p> <p>ST: การเรียนของผมที่ดีขึ้นกว่าแต่ก่อนครับ ผมได้รับความช่วยเหลือจาก เพื่อนจากอาจารย์ ถ้าผมไม่เข้าใจอะไรผมก็ถามรุ่นพี่แล้วเขาก็จะช่วยผม</p> <p>R: เรียนที่นี่มานานเท่าไรแล้วคะ</p> <p>ST: ตอนนี้ก็ราวๆ เดือนครับ</p> <p>R: รู้สึกเบื่อหรือเหนื่อยมั๊ยคะ</p>	<p>R: Could you please introduce yourself? Please tell me your name and what you are studying right now.</p> <p>ST: Sawaddee Krub. My name is Phu (pseudonym). I am studying in Year 1, majoring in Tourism.</p> <p>R: This is the first interview. How are you feeling now?</p> <p>ST: I feel so happy. Yesterday, I had great fun in studying Thai with Thai lecturers.</p> <p>R: What makes you feel so happy?</p> <p>ST: My performance in learning is better than in the past. I have got support from peers and lecturers. When I don't understand the lessons I can ask the seniors and they help me.</p> <p>R: How long have you been studying here?</p> <p>ST: Right now it's around 9 months.</p> <p>R: Have you felt bored or tired?</p>

<p>ST: ไม่เคยเลยครับเพราะว่าเมื่อมีเวลาผมก็จะท่องเที่ยวหรือค้นหาอะไรที่ผม อยากรู้</p> <p>R: ช่วยยกตัวอย่างประกอบว่าจะไร่ที่ำเพื่อผ่อนคลายตัวเองบ้างคะ</p> <p>ST: ก็ไปทำบุญกับเพื่อนแล้วก็ไปออกกำลังกาย ถ้ามีเวลาก็ไปเซ็นทรัล บิ๊กซี แม็ค โคร</p> <p>R: สบายดีมีัยคะ</p> <p>ST: ไร่ครับสบายดีมาก</p> <p>จริงๆแล้วผมก็รู้สึกเหงานิดหน่อยเพราะทุกคนในครอบครัวอยู่ที่เวียดนาม หมด แล้วผมก็ไม่มีเวลาคู่กับพวกเขา แต่ยังไ่ก็ตามเวลาผมเจอเพื่อนๆมันก็ช่วยไ่ดีมาก เพื่อนๆบอกว่าถ้ามีปัญหาอะไรก็แ่บอกพวกเขา</p> <p>R: เพื่อนจากประเทศไหนคะ</p> <p>ST: เพื่อนคนไทยครับ</p> <p>R: โอเคคะ เต็วเราคุยหัวข้ออื่นนะคะ</p> <p>ตอนนี้รู้สึกยังไ่บ้างกับการอยู่ที่ประเทศไทย</p> <p>ST: ผมคิดว่าอยู่ที่นี้จังหวัดนี้ก็ปลอดภัยดี</p> <p>R: ขกมัยคะสำหรับการปรับตัวเข้าสังคมไทย</p> <p>ST: ผมไม่เคยรู้สึกแบบนั้นเลยครับ ที่นี้จริงๆก็เหมือนเวียดนาม คนก็นับถือศาสนาพุทธเหมือนกัน ผมคิดว่าวัฒนธรรมก็เหมือนกันเวลาผมไปวัด</p>	<p>ST: I don't feel that because when I have time I will travel or find about what I want to know.</p> <p>R: Could you please give examples of what you do to relax yourself?</p> <p>ST: I go to make merit with friends and I exercise. When I have free time I go to Central, Big C or Macro.</p> <p>R: Are you fine?</p> <p>ST: Yes, I am. Actually, I feel a little bit lonely because all my family members are in Vietnam and I don't have much time to talk to them. However, when I meet friends they can help a lot. My friends have told me that if there is any problems just tell them?</p> <p>R: Friends from which country?</p> <p>ST: Thai friends.</p> <p>R: Okay, let's move to the next topic. How are you feeling now, living in Thailand?</p> <p>ST: I think living here in this city is very safe.</p> <p>R: Is it hard for you to adjust when you have social gatherings with Thais?</p> <p>ST: No, I haven't felt like that. Here, it is like in Vietnam, people are Buddhist like in Vietnam. I think it is like my culture when I go to temples.</p>
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<p>R: แล้วสามารถใช้ระบบการขนส่งที่นี่ได้ไหมคะ ยากมั๊ยคะ</p> <p>ST: ไม่เลยครับ มันง่ายมาก ผมมักจะนั่งรถตุ๊กๆหน้ามหาวิทยาลัย แล้วผมก็แค่ถามว่ามันราคาเท่าไรหรือผมไปห้างเซ็นทรัล 50 หรือ 60 บาท แล้วคนขับรถก็จะถามผมว่าผมอยากไปไหน มันง่ายมากแล้วคนขับก็ช่วยเหลือดีครับ</p> <p>R: แล้วอาหารไทยล่ะคะ ทานอาหารไทยได้ไหมคะ</p> <p>ST: อาหารไทยส่วนใหญ่เผ็ดแต่ผมก็ทานได้</p> <p>R: แล้วนี่ก็เป็นประเด็นสุดท้ายแล้วนะคะเกี่ยวกับเรื่องการเรียน ช่วยบอกเรื่องการเรียนหน่อยคะ มีปัญหาอะไรมั๊ยตอนนี้</p> <p>ST: ผมมาอยู่ที่นี่ประมาณ 9 เดือน ผมคิดว่าการพูดของผมยังไม่ค่อยดีแต่ผมกำลังปรับตัวอยู่ ผมคิดว่าคุณภาพการสอนที่นี่ก็ดีอยู่เพราะว่าผมพูดไทยได้ลื่นขึ้นกว่าแต่ ก่อน</p> <p>R: ช่วยอธิบายอีกหน่อยนะคะ</p> <p>ST: คือคอร์สเตรียมตัวนี้มีประโยชน์ อาจารย์ช่วยเหลือดีมาก ผมคิดว่าเพราะผมเป็นนักศึกษาต่างชาติ แล้วอาจารย์ก็บอกว่าถ้าผมต้องการคำอธิบายบทเรียนก็ให้บอกอาจารย์ แล้วอาจารย์ก็บอกด้วยว่าทั้งเด็กไทยและเด็กเวียดนามก็เรียนภายใต้สิ่งแ วดล้อมเดียวกันแล้วการประเมินก็จะ ประเมินแบบเดียวกัน ดังนั้นถ้าผมไม่เข้าใจผมก็ต้องปรับตัวแล้วก็ทบทวนบทเรียนศึกษามาก ขึ้น</p>	<p>R: Can you use the transport system here? Is it difficult for you?</p> <p>ST: No, it is not. It's very easy. I always take a Tuk-Tuk in front of the campus. I just ask how much it costs to take me to the Central Department Store. 50 baht or 60 baht. And the driver asks me where I would like to go. It's very easy and the driver is very helpful.</p> <p>R: How about the food? Can you eat Thai food?</p> <p>ST: Thai food, mostly it is spicy but I can eat it.</p> <p>R: And the next one is the last issue. It's about studying. Could you please tell me about your studying? Are there any problems right now?</p> <p>ST: I have been here around 9 months. I think my speaking is not so good. I am adjusting. I think the quality of teaching is good because I can speak Thai much better than in the past.</p> <p>R: Could you please clarify more?</p> <p>ST: The preparative course is beneficial. The lecturers are very supportive. I think because I am a foreign student the lecturers tell me that if I need more clarification about the lessons just to tell them. The lecturers told me that both Thai and foreign students study in the same environment and will be assessed under the same requirements. So if</p>
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<p>R: มีความสุขในการเรียนมั๊ยคะ</p> <p>ST: มีครับ</p> <p>R: ขอบคุณมากสำหรับเวลาวันนี้ค่ะ</p>	<p>I don't understand I have to adjust, I have to review the lessons and research more.</p> <p>R: Are you happy in learning?</p> <p>ST: Yes, I am.</p> <p>R: Thank you for your time today</p>
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