

Improving the Repatriation of Exchange Students

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Abstract – *With the world ascending the globalization ladder at record speed and the increased ease of transcending national borders, repatriation difficulties are becoming a growing matter. Unfortunately, student repatriation difficulties are generally overlooked, and the exchange students may find that the return does not match their expectations, which may lead to difficulty readjusting to a place once considered familiar, and even a home. Repatriation is often studied on an organizational level, while exchange students' return, is not even addressed or very little research has been conducted on the matter. The overall purpose of this research was to identify the unmet needs of repatriate students in regards to repatriation adjustment, and to find potential solutions to ensure that those needs are met. This was achieved using traditional methods of a questionnaire and interviews. The research was able to determine both educational institutions and students need to work together to achieve optimal results; universities and institutions need to become more aware of post-entry difficulties and how to prepare their students, whereas students need to become proactive and learn to utilize all resources at their disposal. It is believed that these conclusions will encourage educational institutions, researchers, and expatriate students to make use of the valuable information in this paper. They can optimize the overall re-entry process by adding to this research with their own research, identifying the difficulties faced by expatriates, developing awareness on the matter, and pooling together their knowledge and efforts to yield efficient and effective solutions.*

Keywords – *Student Repatriation, Exchange Program, Educational Institution, Expatriates, Exchange Students*

I. INTRODUCTION

The sojourns experience of exchange students often begins before they leave their domestic country, as the exchange students may find their emotions and thoughts bombarding and overwhelming at times. At the very least, there is awareness that some form of change will be experienced, whether environmental or cultural, nonetheless, attention is being paid to the matter. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about the exchange students' return to their domestic country. This matter is generally overlooked, and the exchange students may find that the return does not match their expectations. The exchange students may face anything from reverse homesickness and feeling of alienation to boredom, which may lead to difficulty readjusting to a place once considered familiar, and even a home.

Building on the problem is the fact that, the re-entry process, which is not properly acknowledged or researched to begin with, is more often than not, studied

on an organizational level, while exchange students' return, is not even addressed or very little research has been conducted on the matter. Little has been done to help individuals, let alone students to prepare for their return.

Understanding what has influence over the re-entry process of exchange students around the world ought to be the first steps to be taken by researchers and those responsible for the student exchange programs, in order to address the re-entry process and how to overcome its difficulties. Although some research efforts have yielded some useful results, some crucial questions remain unanswered or incomplete. This paper examines some of these questions in hope that the difficulties of the re-entry process are mitigated and the first steps toward enhancing the overall process are being taken.

Firstly, does the type of personality of the exchange students influence their ability to readjust upon re-entry? Albeit, there are many ways to analyze an

individual's personality, and this is a difficult correlation to determine as so many factors have an influence on the situation (i.e. the degree of similarities between domestic culture and the culture the student is visiting, language barriers, the length of stay, etc.), it is reasonable to assume that on a larger scale and generic perspective, there is a correlation between an individual's personality and his/her ability to adjust.

Secondly, did the exchange student have any expectations regarding the difficulties of re-entry? If so, what were these expectations? This question is an important one, because, not only is it interesting to find out whether or not the exchange student's institution prepared them for the re-entry process, but also, it can be determined, whether or not these students had expectations of their own, if so, what were they? And how did they prepare themselves? This would reveal whether or not difficulty upon re-entry is actually expected.

The third question this paper explores is, which of the cross-cultural adjustment dimensions (general living adjustment, work (educational) adjustment, and interaction adjustment) was found to be the most difficult? And why? If a particular dimension could be universally recognized as the most difficult of the three, this may encourage institutions around the world at the very least, to address this dimension and better prepare for it upon re-entry.

The research in this paper concludes by determining how both institutions and exchange students can better prepare for the re-entry process. Recommendations are determined through literature review as well as asking past and present exchange students to weigh in their own opinions. Finally, despite the fact that this paper is attempting to explore how to improve the re-entry process of exchange students, it may also be applied to other forms of expatriates as well.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In order to magnify the quality of the results, there was an interest in utilizing both primary and secondary resources for the research; the secondary resources were used more as a tool of support for the primary resources. Be that is it may, only necessary resources were used, as we wanted to avoid threatening the integrity and quality of the research.

There were two forms of primary resources used in this research, a questionnaire and interviews. The development of the questionnaire involved several steps; the first step involved using literature review to identify important factors that have influence on re-entry, previously identified by other researchers.

Meanwhile, the second step involved developing a draft questionnaire from the results attained from the literature review and conducting a mini-survey on a small group of exchange students. The small group of exchange students were asked to either suggest questions that were important but missing or to remove any questions they considered unimportant and irrelevant. With consideration to the results of the mini-survey, the official questionnaire was developed (refer to Appendix A). Each section of the questionnaire included a set of questions intended to answer one of the main questions this paper is exploring.

The first section of the questionnaire concerns basic information about the exchange student, such as: his/her name, contact information, his/her domestic country, the name of his/her educational institution, and the length of their study abroad. This was to identify the degree to which the questionnaire became international.

The second section concerns whether or not the type of personality of the exchange students influences their ability to readjust upon re-entry. Based on the literature review and the draft questionnaire, a question for each of the 5 big personality traits:

- Openness: those who score high in this trait, are people who enjoy new experiences and like to learn new things.
- Conscientiousness: those who score high in this trait, are people who are very reliable and organized.
- Extraversion: those who score high in this trait, are people who enjoy interacting with others and tend to be talkative.
- Agreeableness: those who score high in this trait, are people who are cooperative, kind, and friendly.
- Neuroticism: those who score high in this trait, are people who experience emotional instability and tend to be moody and tense (Gosling, Rentfrow, Swann Jr. 2003).

These were developed along with a question regarding the difficulty of re-entry in order to determine if there was a correlation.

The third section focused on the expectations of re-entry adjustment difficulties. This was to determine if the institution contributed to these expectations or was the exchange student completely self-reliant. Also, there was an interest in identifying the pre-departure and post-entry expectations of the exchange students, to determine the gap between them.

The fourth section of the questionnaire concerns which dimension of the cross-cultural adjustment dimensions:

- **General-Living Adjustment:** this included everyday life factors and activities, such as, until what time the stores remain open, where an individual goes to mail a letter, cultural differences, holidays (religious, ethnic, or historical events), means of transportation, food, etc.
- **Interaction Adjustment:** this includes how people communicate, both verbally, and non-verbally, with one another. Examples include: how people greet one another (shake hands, hug, pat on the back, etc.), culture (topical issues and jargon), social networks moving on, people listening to your stories, etc.
- **Work (education) Adjustment:** Education adjustment for repatriate students is how a repatriate student copes in regards to re-integrating with the home educational institution's way of delivering its teaching services. This includes differing delivery styles in which material and knowledge is conveyed from professor to student, such as a more interactive case based learning approach vs a more lecturing style of approach. Whether the foreign country's institution utilized power point slides or mainly used text book readings. How helpful and accessible the professors and teaching assistants are, if there are any out of class "academic help centers" to aid students in understanding the conveyed material, etc. These are all facets which can lead to difficulties in education adjustment for repatriate students (Palthe, 2004).

did the exchange student find to be the most difficult. If a prevailing dimension can be identified, facilitating the re-entry process of exchange students can be made that much easier.

The final section of the questionnaire concerns encouraging respondents to provide suggestions on not only how their institutions can improve the re-entry process, but also, how others, like themselves can improve the process for themselves.

A 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (low, not really, low difficulty) to 5 (high, very much, high difficulty) was used in grading most of the responses, while other responses were either check-lists or unstructured.

As for the interviews, two were conducted with administrative staff from a participating university. The first interview was conducted with the head of the business college exchange program, and the other with the head of the University's exchange program. The intention of conducting these interviews was to identify what institutions are currently doing for their students

who go on exchange and return, and to determine any future plans they may have. More details on the interviews may be found in Appendix B.

The final form of resources used in the research were secondary resources, such as, research articles. As previously mentioned, the secondary resources are included as tools of support for the primary resources.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Both the questionnaire and the interviews have yielded quite the interesting results. First the results from the questionnaire will be discussed and analyzed, and then the results and analyses of the interviews will follow.

The Student Re-entry Questionnaire

The questionnaire is considerably successful with 37 respondents, from 18 different countries, from 25 different universities around the world (refer to Appendix C). The results were interesting and quite revealing.

The first question the questionnaire addresses is, whether or not the type of personality of the exchange students influenced their ability to readjust upon re-entry. The survey revealed that of the 37 students, 76 percent had an exchange period of less than six months. Although, many factors influence an individual's ability to adjust, for this study in particular, attention must be paid to the length of the exchange spent by a student abroad, as the student might not have experienced change and differences long enough to experience the same level of readjustment difficulties as the remaining 24 percent of the respondents who spent more than six months on exchange abroad.

As for the correlation between personality traits and the ability to readjust upon re-entry, the results were in favor of the hypothesis posed in the introduction of this paper, that is, a relationship indeed exists. To elaborate, more than 90% of the respondents scored themselves a 3 or higher when asked if they considered themselves outgoing (extraversion), if they enjoyed working with others (agreeableness), if they enjoyed uncertainty and trying new things (openness to experiences), if they considered themselves to be very organized and have the tendency to think in the long-term (conscientiousness), and if they had the tendency to be calm in difficult and unexpected situations (neuroticism); meanwhile, 76 percent of the respondents scored themselves a 3 or lower when asked to define the degree of difficulty they faced upon re-entry. This is suggestive that some form of linear relationship exists between an outgoing, sociable, and emotionally

intelligent individual and the ability to readjust upon re-entry.

In support of this conclusion, according to results from secondary research, individuals with dogmatic characteristics (i.e. thinking one is always correct) initially tend to appear as though they are able to adjust well, however, as they progress in the ‘U-curve of cross cultural adjustment’: honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and mastery (Gautam & Vishwakarma 2012) they face many difficulties in the “pulling up” stage (O’Sullivan, 2014).

Regarding the second question this paper is exploring, do students whom go on exchange have any expectations regarding the difficulties of re-entry? If so, what were these expectations? According to the results of the questionnaire, only 38% of the respondents’ institutions addressed the possibility of re-entry adjustment difficulties, reflecting lack of acknowledgment of the importance of discussing this matter. Furthermore, of the 38 percent of the respondents, the majority of the students selected “reverse culture shock” and “social network moving on” as their top two concerns discussed by their institutions regarding re-entry adjustment difficulties. This reflects that on a universal level, universities identify these two factors among the most prevailing difficulties faced upon re-entry.

In reference to the questionnaire, of the 37 respondents, only 16% received support from their institution upon re-entry, clearly reflecting that most educational institutions are mainly focusing on the “willingness to move” factor, however, do not follow up with the re-entry issues. At the core, this is the most likely reason institutions fail with the repatriation stage of their students. Of the institutions that do provide support upon re-entry, 33% provide support through group meetings, 25% through counseling, and 25% through events for mingling. This is suggestive that institutions rely heavily on past and current students to support one another, in hopes that that is enough to help the student adapt and cope with difficulties faced. Admittedly, this may be an effective solution, however, it should not be the only solution, and perhaps promoting a mentoring program may elevate effectiveness in terms of supporting the individual psychological needs of the students.

An unfortunate result that the questionnaire revealed was, not only did 59% of the respondents expect difficulty upon re-entry, but also, that they themselves would have to handle it on their own. Meanwhile, only 8% expected their institution to help them. The results are quite interesting, especially, since the results from

the previous section revealed that very few institutions address the possibility of re-entry adjustments difficulties, meaning these expectations that the students have manifested, are from individual awareness regarding the whole expatriation and repatriation process. As researchers, this causes us to ponder, if students themselves, without being informed, have awareness of re-entry adjustment difficulties, why do institutions not share this same level of awareness?

The succeeding results then pointed out, that 68% of the respondents felt that their expectations were met upon re-entry, while 24 percent felt that some expectations were met and some weren’t. When asked to provide details on their response, the respondents mentioned that they were aware that they would experience reverse culture shock, boredom, etc. They explained how they had done some research on their own or had relied on people they knew already completed the exchange program. Although, the majority of the respondents had their expectations met, this does reflect an effective repatriation system, an example of this is the following response from one of the participants: “I expected it to be very difficult to re-adjust to normal life after my exchange. The University of Ottawa did not provide any support for my re-entry process, though it should have!” Thus, a combination of previous research and relying on social networks, the students are able to adjust their expectations and have them met upon re-entry.

What can be determined from these results, is that unfortunately, the current lack of attention being paid to the matter of student repatriation is translating to the expectations of the students. Many of the students don’t expect help from their educational institutions because support has not been offered in the past for any support to be expected in the present. Perhaps if support by educational institutions in the re-entry process becomes the norm in the future, that will translate in the expectations of the students in the future as well.

In terms of personal support system, according to the results from the questionnaire, the majority of respondents had developed a personal support system through friends, other students who went on exchange, and family members. Reflecting how based on their expectations, that there would be difficulty upon re-entry and they would have to handle it on their own, they choose to prepare through personal means. As such, if personal support systems play such a big role in expectations and ability to readjust upon re-entry, institutions should consider including members of these support systems in orientations and information

sessions, or even integrate them in the repatriation process.

As for the third question that this paper is examining, which dimension of the cross-cultural adjustment dimensions did the exchange student find to be the most difficult? The following are the results of the degree of general living readjustment difficulties:

- Sixty-two percent of the respondents felt a low degree of general living adjustment by scoring themselves a 2 or lower, 19% scored themselves a 3, 19% scored themselves a 4 or higher.
- Fifty-seven percent of the respondents felt a low degree of educational (working) adjustments by scoring themselves a 2 or lower, 35 % scored themselves a 3, 8% scored themselves a 4 or higher.
- Fifty-four percent of the respondents felt a low degree of difficulty in regards to their re-entry interaction adjustment by scoring themselves a 2 or lower, 38% scored themselves a 3, 8% scored themselves a 4 or higher.

An analytical tool that was found to be the most optimal in identifying the most difficult adjustment dimension was used, the weighted average approach:

- General living adjustment:
 $(1(12)+2(11)+3(7)+4(7)+5(0))/37 = 2.243243$
- Education adjustment:
 $(1(10)+2(11)+3(6)+4(7)+5(3))/37 = 2.513514$
- Interaction adjustment:
 $(1(16)+2(4)+3(14)+4(2)+5(1))/37 = 2.135135$

The results identified that the adjustment dimension that was found to be the most difficult was the education adjustment dimension, with general living adjustment following, and interaction adjustment found to be the least difficult dimension.

Educational adjustment prevailing as the most difficult dimension is indicative that differing teaching methods and mediums play a heavy role in a student's ability to adjust upon repatriation. This can especially be a difficult adjustment dimension if the students have become accustomed to the teaching methods that were used at their host university, and if they actually favor them to their home university's teaching methods.

The final outcome from the questionnaire was regarding the recommendations on how institutions and students that go abroad can enhance the repatriation process. In response to the questionnaire, the majority of the respondents recommended that universities implement a pre-departure informative program, through which students may learn about the challenges that they may face upon re-entry. The program would

help the students to develop realistic expectations with regards to the challenges faced upon re-entry.

Another recommendation by the respondents involves creating a mentoring program that could help the students embarking on the exchange program with educational, social and emotional support. Universities social events may be a mean of achieving this, or the typical buddy system, in which previous participants of the exchange program are paired up with new participants.

As to how actual participants of the exchange program can enhance their re-entry process, the majority of the respondents recommended that the participants approach the entire experience with a proactive attitude; in other words, the participants themselves should proactively seek information regarding their concerns, and not simply expect it to be handed to them. This approach yields beneficial results, especially with regards to the student's expectations.

Furthermore, many of the respondents could not stress enough the importance of having personal support groups to discuss any difficulties that they may be experiencing. Maintaining contact with relationships in both the host and home countries are very important, especially to provide emotional and social support. The general conclusion was that by accomplishing this, the participants felt supported and able to cope. Overall, these recommendations are suggestive that both institutions and students need to work together to achieve optimal results. Universities and institutions need to become more aware of post-entry difficulties and how to prepare their students, whereas students need to become proactive and learn to utilize all resources at their disposal.

Interviews

The first interview to be examined is that with the head of a business college exchange program. The interview quickly revealed that, although this program addresses the pre-departure concerns well, it could improve how it addresses the post-entry concerns of the exchange students. Many of the events held for the returning students are voluntary, and more often than not, the events involve mingling with students whom are about to leave for their exchange, and helping them prepare for their journey. Examples of this are: invitations to present in pre-departure info sessions and the welcome orientation, in which past and current exchange students may mingle. Granted, this is considerably helpful, it still fails to address the issues faced by students returning from their study abroad.

The interview also revealed that the most prevailing issue faced by returning students is reverse culture shock. The head of the business college exchange program did mention that if students did approach the office with adjustment difficulties, they would be referred to the Student Academic Success Service (SASS) for help, such as counselling or encouraged to join business college exchange program, where past students whom went abroad can help current and future students going abroad. The interview concluded with the mention that there are no future plans for the program, except determining how to increase the number of students whom participate in the program.

This is suggestive, that although the business college exchange program could reach out more to its participating students, that perhaps, the students whom are facing readjustment problems can be proactive and approach the office, if help is needed.

Surprisingly, although, both exchange programs are part of the same university, the second interview with the head of the University's exchange program revealed different results to those found in the first interview. The pre-departure process is quite similar to that of the business college exchange program, however, for the post-entry process, the University exchange program holds a returning students evening, dedicated to sharing stories and helping the student with re-entry adjustment, especially interaction adjustment; also, the participating students are asked to provide recommendations and tips on how the overall program can be improved, and finally, the students are asked to fill out a questionnaire upon re-entry.

Additionally, the interview revealed that the most prevailing problem for students returning, is in fact, reverse culture shock. The University exchange program handles this situation similar to how the business college exchange program handles it, referring the student to SASS. However, the University exchange program is realizing the growing importance of dealing with re-entry adjustment difficulties, as such, the future plans for the program includes an application on the university's website, to follow the student throughout their exchange experience based on five stages, with the forth being re-entry and reverse culture shock. Information is provided on the matter, and solutions to overcome the problems are provided.

This implies that the University exchange programs is becoming quite aware of the importance of addressing post-entry difficulties and has great initiatives to improve the program.

Overall, both interviews revealed that the exchange programs may still be more focused on the pre-

departure process, however, there is awareness of the growing importance of the post-entry process and handling its difficulties. Both exchange programs and participating students need to show initiative and become proactive in order to improve not only the re-entry process, but the overall experience as well..

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Any conclusions made at this point and time should be considered tentative. The validity and reliability of our questionnaire can only improve through continual accumulation of quality data on this subject. The research has not only yielded interesting results, but also taught us valuable lessons, such as, sometimes what we forecast the results to be does not always come to fruition. An example of this is educational adjustment prevailing as the most difficult cross-cultural dimension to adjust to upon re-entry to the domestic country. The hypothesis was, that most likely the general living dimension would prevail as this dimension is a broad one which covers many day-to-day activities, however, the results revealed that even educational institutions can be worlds apart. Another lesson to be learnt is, that although institutions need to have higher awareness of difficulties faced upon re-entry, students need to be more proactive themselves in communicating their issues. The interviews with the heads of the exchange programs at the university brought to light how students are not communicating these issues to their institutions. Students need to become aware that if they wish to witness change and results, that they themselves have to become part of the change.

Firms, researchers, HR departments, and expatriates can all make use of the valuable information in this paper by optimizing the overall re-entry process, adding to this research with their own research, identifying the difficulties faced by expatriates, developing awareness on the matter, and pooling together their knowledge and efforts to yield efficient and effective solutions.

As researchers, we will carry the valuable lessons and information uncovered in this research with us in our everyday lives to help better our future careers; by building awareness of the importance repatriate programs, not only on an organizational level, but also, and educational level, highlighting the importance of return on investment and psychological contracts. Finally, promoting the ability to understand the implications involved when going abroad and returning, and learning how on a personal level, to deal with these implications.

While a lot of work needs to be done, we expect to see more focus and attention paid to expatriates and the

whole expatriation/repatriation process. Awareness of the importance of the matter and the consequences of not properly addressing the matter is beginning to grow. Student exchange programs in the past may have been unheard of or uncommon, however with rising globalization and the increased ease of transcending national borders, student exchange programs are becoming much more popular and common.

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