

Conceptualizing intercultural adaptation development in students of international training programs in higher education

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ABSTRACT: *Student intercultural adaptation in higher education has been extensively studied throughout the world, primarily from socio-cultural and psychological perspectives. This paper draws on recognition, agency and transformative learning theories to develop a conceptual framework of intercultural adaptation in students of international training programs in higher education. Firstly, it articulates intercultural adaptation issues that have been presented in the recent literature. Secondly, it conceptualizes “intercultural adaptation” in student self-transformation through exercising their “needs-response agency” and “agency for becoming” that is shaped by structural and affective recognition in ecological circumstances. Accordingly, the needs-response agency is manifested in students’ intentions and actions in response to structural contexts in terms of international curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogy, intercultural support policies and extra-curricular programs. Meanwhile, agency for becoming is exhibited in self-transformation to become more interculturally adaptable through future aspirations and goals, agentive access to available resources and support and a stimulating environment. The paper concludes by arguing for a critical orientation towards transformed agency through structural and affective recognition as a worthwhile means of achieving effective intercultural adaptation in students of international training programs in higher education.*

KEYWORDS: Intercultural adaptation, recognition theory, transformative learning, international training programs, higher education.

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1. Introduction

Internationalization has become an increasing trend in higher education over the past decades in Vietnam. As part of the process, intercultural adaptation has inevitably been made a requisite for students of the international training programs. There are two main ways of conceptualizing *intercultural adaptation*: (1) as the end result of a process of transformation and (2) as the process itself.

As the end result of a transformation process, adaptations can be seen as “longer-term outcomes” comprised of three discernible kinds: psychological, sociocultural and intercultural. Accordingly, psychological adaption refers to those internal senses of personal well-being

and self-esteem or “feeling well” whereas the sociocultural one is about “doing well” and the final intercultural one reflects the degree individuals are able to establish relations or “relating well” (Berry et al., 2021). In other words, adaptation in this sense can be considered as the acquisition of intercultural competence for individuals to effectively and appropriately manage their interactions (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009). Hammer (2015) coins a term for the above paradigm of literature the “CAB” along the three popular dimensions most popularly explored: Cognitive, Affective and Behavioral.

As an alternative approach to the CAB, Hammer (2015) points to the Developmental paradigm which pays attention to the ways

“individuals engage cultural difference in a more holistic, sense-making/sense acting framework”. Intercultural adaptation in this sense is a process in which individuals build their competence, involving a “more complex way of understanding and responding to patterns of cultural difference between self and other” (Hammer, 2015). The developmental paradigm thus goes beyond the static personal characteristics to allow investigation into the dynamic interaction between individuals and their surrounding environment.

Another set of different approaches in intercultural adaptation is between the unidirectional development of competence with assimilation as the final goal and the differential approach that allows taking into account individual experiences. In the assimilation approach, individual particularities and contexts are sacrificed in the generation of a model for the successful transformation of individuals from an outsider to an insider in a different culture (Garza & Ono, 2015). Such a way of universalization does not guarantee a process as “personal and complex” as acculturation. The differential approach of adaptation suggests bringing back into consideration the context that is related to the interplay of power and agency or the way individuals’ experience with intercultural interactions is structured (Garza & Ono, 2015).

Recognizably, there have also been different models of intercultural adaptation development. Gregersen-Hermans (2017) identifies several groups of models of adaptation all of which show a tendency to emphasize individual assets that help the adaptation process. Some models primarily focus on how to enable individuals to achieve the elements of intercultural adaptation such as desirable knowledge, desirable skills and requisite attitudes (Deardorff, 2006; Bryam, 1997). Some other models underline the development of cognitive structure rather than changes in attitudes and behavior (Hammer, 2009). For example, the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) created by Bennett (2004) seeks to explain the observed and reported experiences of people in intercultural situations. Recently, the cross-cultural adaptation model developed by Kim (2020) focuses on the

psychological adaptation process and preparation of cognitive, affective and operational areas of individuals in order to act and react in social communication.

Different from those models, several authors have recently underscored the “agency” of students in their intercultural adaptation. Tran and Vu (2018) provides an alternative approach to the “deficit” models in which the positioning theory was utilized to investigate the way international students conduct their agency in their intercultural encounters. Most recently, Berry et al. (2021) touch upon agency when looking into the strategies and expectations of groups in cultural contact. Accordingly, the strategies and expectations are based on three underlying issues: (i) the degree to which there is a desire to maintain the original culture and identity; (ii) the degree to which there is a desire to engage in daily interactions with other groups in the larger society; and (iii) the relative power of the groups in contact to choose their preferred way of engaging each other. In this model, the preferences of groups and their actions reflect the agency in intercultural contact. Particularly, it is asserted that when individuals find confidence in their cultural identity and place in the society (security) they would accept those who are different in the society. However, Berry and his associates focus more on the psychological process within individuals and the potential policies that would help in the adaptation process while neglecting the active role that adapters themselves could play.

Though agentive qualities of individuals have been recognized to be critically important for intercultural adaptation, none of these models addresses it from the politics of recognition and transformative learning. This paper contributes with an intercultural adaptation development model emphasizing individuals’ self-transformation through fostering “needs-response agency” and “agency for becoming” that is shaped by structural and affective recognition in ecological circumstances.

2. Theoretical framework of intercultural adaptation development

In this paper, intercultural adaptation is

developed for students on the basis of three major theories including recognition theory, agency theory and transformative learning theory in ecological circumstances (Figure 1).

2.1. Recognition theory and intercultural adaptation

Recognition theory adopted in examining intercultural adaptation is seen from two perspectives: (i) structural recognition (Fraser, 2003, 2008); (ii) affective recognition (Taylor, 1992; Honneth, 1995). From the social justice perspective, Fraser (2003) defines justice as “parity of participation”. Specifically, Fraser addresses institutionalized hierarchies of cultural value as a major institutionalized obstacle that may deny them the requisite standing. This is a case of status inequality or misrecognition. Furthermore, representation is chiefly related to issues of membership and procedures. At one level, it is a matter of social belonging indicating who is included in and who is excluded from the community. At another level, it concerns the procedures that structure public processes of

contestation in which the community’s decision rules accord equal voice in public deliberations and fair representation in public decision making to all members. As such, in Fraser’s perspective, recognition is the remedy for injustice when institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute actors as peers, capable of participating on a par with one another in social life, or in other words, obtaining status equality in terms of culture and identity recognition in the educational and training institutions.

From the “human right” and “self-actualization” perspectives, Taylor (1992) and Honneth (1995) distinguish different forms of recognition. In multiculturalism, Taylor (1992) addresses a “politics of universalism” aiming at the equal recognition of all persons in their common humanity. Meanwhile, a “politics of difference” emphasizes the uniqueness of specific (and especially cultural) features often associated with communitarianism. Taylor also emphasizes that the recognition of concrete individuality in contexts of loving care is of

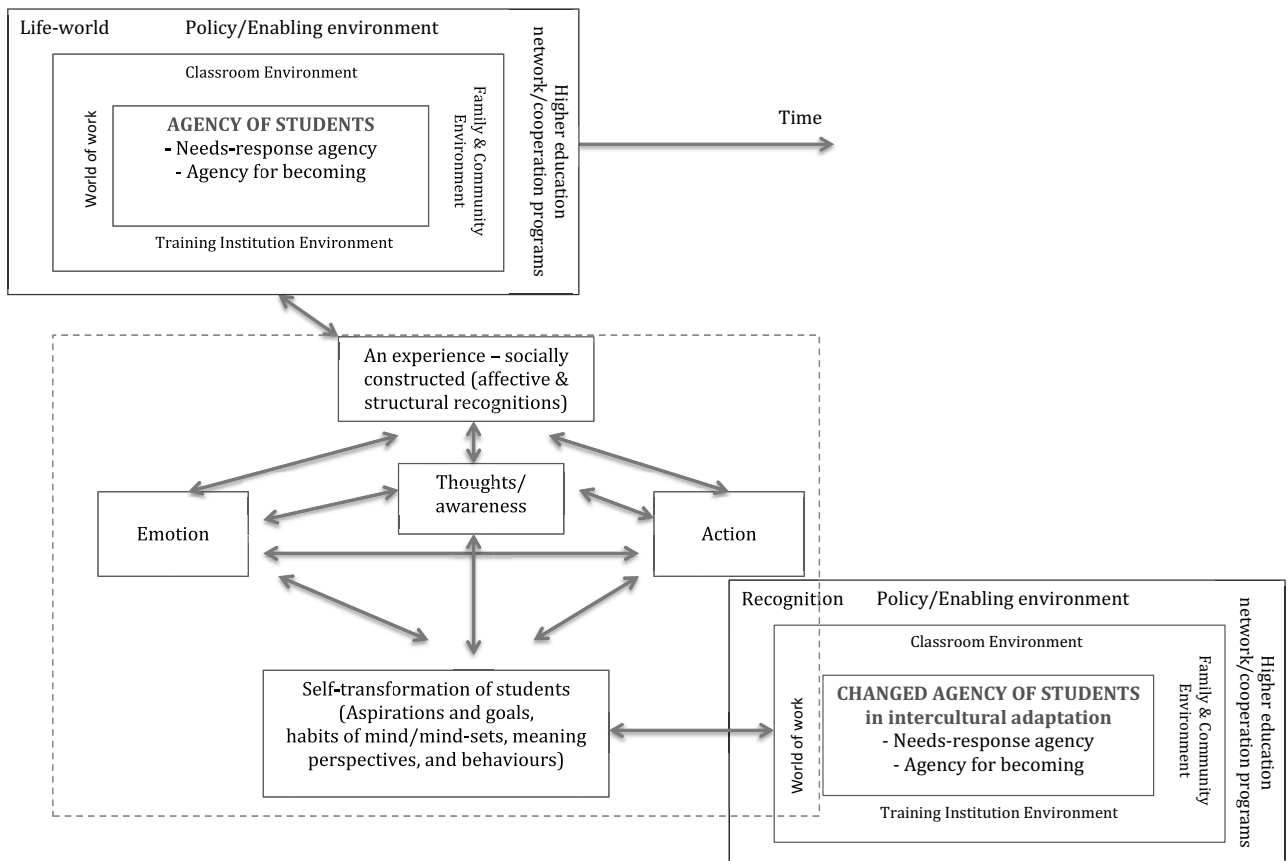


Figure 1: Theoretical Framework of Intercultural Adaptation Development in a social-cultural ecological transformative environment

utmost importance to subjects. On this account, equal recognition is seen as the foundation for building a healthy democratic society. Whereas the refusal of recognizing a certain culture explicitly hinders or even damages the development of its members. Worse, wrong recognition with inferior and undignified images on other cultures contained implicit oppression because these wrongly recognized images are gradually internalized and subsequently destroy individuals' self-identity. Similarly, Honneth (1995) stresses that disrespect not only harms "subjects and restricts their freedom to act", but also "injures them with regards to the positive understanding of themselves that they have acquired intersubjectively". More explicitly, Honneth describes three groups of experience of respect with regards to self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem. He points out that cultural denigration and social devaluation destroy basic self-confidence and bring with it a loss of moral self-respect and loss of personal self-concept of those with such experience. As such, Taylor and Honneth put an emphasis on equal respect and equal dignity among cultures or groups and within culture or group as the principles for recognition. The principle of equal respect requires treatment for diversified groups in a difference-blind fashion for the generality. And the principle of equal dignity commands a treatment in a difference-responsive manner for the particularity. The affirmation of uniqueness ensures the equal opportunity of development and empowerment of minorities' voices (Taylor, 1992). When such politics of recognition are adopted in intercultural adaptation development for students, it secures a balance between diversity and unity in both policies and practices. On the one hand, the provision of education must provide opportunities for all cultural and ethnic groups to entrench their group's culture and language and to be structurally included. On the other hand, all members from diverse groups need to be maximally open towards alien cultures in the principle of mutual recognition. In such relationships, they are supposed to experience the needs, desires and goals of valuing their own cultures and self-identity while altering their ego as furtherance of their own "social"

freedom (Taylor, 1992; Honneth, 2014). In this intercultural adaptation process, psychological or affective dimensions for all subsequent forms of recognition are supposed to be exposed in loving care that represents the maximal conditions for positive self-realization, personal integrity, stable subjectivity and self-respect (Fraser & Honneth, 2003; Honneth, 1995, 2014).

2.2. Agency theory and intercultural adaptation

From a life-course perspective, agency is defined as "the ability to exert control over and give direction to one's life" (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In this sense, agency should be understood as "the ability to operate independently of determining constraint of social structure" (Calhoun, 2002). Importantly, agency is informed by the past experience, including personal and professional biographies; orientated towards the future, and acted out in the present where such enactment is influenced by what we refer to as cultural, material and structural resources (Biesta et al., 2015). In essence, agency encompasses the dynamic interplay between three dimensions including routine (acquired patterns of action), purpose (motivating "forces") and judgement (the engagement with the situation in the here-and-now) (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Notably, agency is exercised in and through engagement with particular temporal-relational contexts-for-action (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). Thus, students' agency can be manifested in how they think they are expected to respond to the structure and how they personally want to respond. And it can be achieved from the interplay of individual efforts, available resources and contextual and structural factors in certain situations (Biesta et al., 2015).

In intercultural communication, students exercise different forms of agency in response to their emerging needs for effective integration. Two primary forms of agency in intercultural adaptation is highlighted in this paper including needs-response agency and agency for becoming. Accordingly, the needs-response agency underscores students' intention and action in response to the structural and social context around them to realize their learning, social or wellbeing needs in intercultural communication (Hopwood,

2010). Meanwhile, agency for becoming situates the expression of agency in relation to student self-transformation and future aspirations associated with intercultural contexts (Tran & Vu, 2018). On this account, students' agency in intercultural adaptation is revealed through the ways they set out to achieve a particular goal and position themselves in this striving process (self-positioning). Moreover, agency in intercultural adaptation requires them to position the relations to different actors (for example, teachers and peers) and navigate the ways they agentively interact with them (other positioning). Notably, engaging in the international training programs, they are able to position themselves in the ways (they think) that are required by different social forces (i.e. the institutional structure or program partnership, etc.) (forced self-positioning). Finally, they know to adopt a new position as a result of previous experience and interaction. Based on this, they redefine their ways of thinking, acting in accordance with new context (repositioning) (Edwards, 2011; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

As such, the development of students' agency in intercultural adaptation interplays with their self-transformation in which they are enabled to confront "contradictory or otherwise problematic situations" (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), to position their own goals or aspirations and future life-course and relationships, to investigate worthwhile transformed conditions and to enact the relevant actions (Callard, 2018). In such a self-transformation process, students are required to take transformative learning in surrounding ecological conditions and circumstances (Biesta et al., 2015, Tran et al., 2020).

2.3. Transformative learning theory and intercultural adaptation

Mezirow's transformative learning theory explains the learning and changes that an individual experience in becoming intercultural adaptable. Accordingly, transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference that encompasses mindsets, habits of mind and meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1997, 2018). In intercultural environment, transformation requires the sojourners to look at his or her world from a different point of view – a perspective of the world that is often contradicted

with personal values and beliefs (Taylor, 1994). Three common constructs emerge as being fundamental for learning that is transformational including experience, reflection, and dialogue (Mezirow, 2000; Buttigieg and Calleja, 2020). As such, becoming critically reflective of one's own assumptions and others' is the key to transforming one's set frame of reference and effective collaborative problem posing and solving (Mezirow, 1997, 2003).

Transformative learning involves experiencing a shift of consciousness that radically and perpetually changes our being in the world. "*Such a shift involves our understanding of ourselves and our self-locations; our relationships with other humans and the natural world; our understanding of the relations of power in interlocking structures of class, race and gender...*" (Mezirow, , page??). On this account, intercultural adaptation of an individual undergoes internal changes that take place during a successful intercultural experience and in communicative process (Taylor, 1994). During this process, one's "frame of reference" is transformed through the ten phases (Mezirow, 2000, 2018), beginning with a disorienting dilemma (an incongruent experience or cultural shock) as a catalyst for change. The following stages as the process of transforming one's frames of reference with learning experience can be grouped into three phases (Taylor, 1994):

a phase or pattern of alienation and initial contact in which a person makes self-examination of understanding oneself (feelings, thoughts), explores discontent and options of new roles, intercultural relationship and adaptation, plans a course of intercultural adaptation; a trial and error period of testing new habits and assumptions in which a person acquires intercultural knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans, tries new roles, builds competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships; and a phase of duality and interdependence within the new culture in which a person reintegrates into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

This transformation process clarifies how an individual makes meaning of new cultural experiences, and simultaneously integrates that new learning into a more inclusive and

discriminating worldview (Taylor, 1994). As a result, a self-transformed individual will effectively engage in intercultural adaptation with his/her changed agency.

3. Intercultural Adaptation Development in ecological circumstances

This paper defines intercultural adaptation as a self-transformation process that is determined by one's "agency" in response to new contexts. It primarily engages in two forms of agency namely "needs-response agency" and "agency for becoming" in ecological circumstances. Notably, self-transformation and agency development is an interplay process. It occurs in terms of emotion, thoughts/awareness, and action through their experience that is socially constructed and shaped by affective and structural recognition and critical self-reflection.

This process engages in dealing with a disorienting dilemma (specifically, contradictory or otherwise problematic situations), positioning their own goals and/or aspirations, future life-course and relationships, investigating worthwhile transformed conditions or resources and enacting self-initiated actions towards fulfilling their future aspirations/goals (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; Callard, 2018, Biesta et al., 2015). Throughout this process, *structural recognition* creates the par participation for all students from different ethnic groups by institutionalizing their culture and identity on an equal basis in the international training programs. As such, structural recognition can facilitate students' agency exposure in the provision of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, intercultural integration support policies and programs, and intercultural enabling environment. Meanwhile, *affective recognition* enhances positive emotions for students by securing their self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem by loving care and equal treatment in international training programs. Affective recognition can offer spaces for students to exercise their agency by enabling them to set their future aspirations and goals, agentive access to available resources and support, relationship and network building with emphasis on valuing their own cultures and self-identity.

3.1. Needs-response agency and self-transformation in intercultural contexts

Needs-response agency belongs to the category of relational agency which involves a capacity to be supported and be a supporter (Edwards & Mackenzie, 2005). This form of agency is described as students' intentions and actions in response to the structural and social conditions to achieve their particular needs in intercultural adaptation. As such, students should first understand what they need in their intercultural adaptation and analyze what possible resources in others are available and know how to mobilize such resources to achieve their goals.

Needs-response agency involves capacities to deal with temporal learning, social or well-being needs which are specific demands (Hopwood, 2010). As noted, they have a strong need to be equally recognized in terms of their culture and self-identity in the training institutions (Fraser, 2003; Honneth, 1995; Taylor, 1992). This can be reflected through internationalized curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogy, intercultural support policies and extra-curricular programs in order to secure their academic success and well-being in the educational setting (Glass and Westmont, 2014). In responding to their needs, students exercise their agency by their active engagement in the provision of these learning conditions and by their active mobilization of resources for its realization. In this regard, students become co-constructors of curriculum, teaching approach and pedagogy and extracurricular programs in the internationally educational setting (Bovill et al., 2011; Healey et al., 2014; Trinh & Conner, 2019).

Internationalized curriculum

In response to the academic and socio-emotional needs of students, the training institutions need to secure the provision of internationalized curriculum in which their cultures and self-identity are formally recognized on a respectful and equal basis (Sorkos & Hajisoteriou, 2020). The internationalized curriculum adopts the position that international perspectives of students can be developed through a strong emphasis on teaching and learning in culturally diverse settings (Bodycott et al., 2013). In an internationalized curriculum, students

will be engaged “with internationally informed research and cultural and linguistic diversity, purposefully developing their international and intercultural perspectives as global professionals and citizens” (Leask, 2009). In the spirit of integrating students’ learning experiences and cultural assets in internationalized curriculum design and delivery, students shall be offered with space of their self-expressions and ownership, subsequently reinforced with their strong sense of self-respect self-esteem. As a result, the student-student connection, student-institution synergy, and the mutual understanding are fostered when students actively engage in curriculum design and delivery (Delpish et al., 2010; Leask, 2015). Furthermore, students’ active engagement in curriculum design throughout the 4-year training program had a clear impact on the intercultural mindset of students. It shifts the way students see the world towards a more ethno-relative worldview through their gained experiences in intercultural situations as they become more culturally sensitive in dealing with cultural differences and appropriately adapt their communication and behavior (Sample, 2012).

Students can actively contribute their experiences and cultural perspectives to distinctly different iterations of formal internationalized curriculum namely academic content, opportunities of student mobility, international student recruitment, and collaborations with other higher education institutions. For example, the course content of social science program can be designed with set topics that can enable students’ active contributions of their perspectives such as: fitting in; visible and invisible cultures; language, communication and courtesy; friendship building and a range of broader social issues. Such topics can be mixed with those suggested by students, e.g., family - honour, authority and dealing with conflict; race and racism; politics and patriotism; fashion; art; music; technology and gaming; festivals and funerals, etc. (Bodycott et al., 2013). In addition, students can play an active role in introducing, connecting their international training program coordinators with national and international universities which provide them with opportunities for student exchange, language immersion, international internships, study tours, service learning and volunteer programs.

Culturally responsive pedagogy

Teaching approach or pedagogy is known as an effective way to facilitate students’ intercultural adaptation. Culturally responsive pedagogy is a student-centered approach to teaching that includes cultural references and recognizes the importance of students’ cultural backgrounds and experiences in all aspects of learning. This pedagogy positions students and teachers themselves as both facilitators and learners and actively co-create and co-deliver instructional hours (Samuels, 2018). As such, training institutions’ policy regulates and encourages their teaching staff to develop a culturally responsive pedagogy in which the knowledge, experience and skills of domestic and international students are incorporated as a basis to develop intercultural understandings, attitudes and communications skills in educational settings. In this pedagogy, students are valued as a rich source of cultural knowledge and perspectives in delivering the internationalized curriculum. The recognition of students’ individuality helps them feel connected or tied with people, secured in culturally diverse environment and encouraged in making contributions to their unique cultural perspectives (Bodycott et al., 2013; Bethel et al., 2020). This affects their strategies and expectations of adaptation and subsequently the progress of their adaptation (Berry et al., 2021)

In order to co-construct the culturally responsive pedagogy in classroom settings, students are to be culturally literate, actively make self-reflective analysis, constructively create caring and inclusive classrooms, respect for diversity and critically contribute their cultural perspectives (Nawang, 1998). Their contributions are to be taken seriously in classrooms and thus they could play the role as equal co-constructors of pedagogy in classrooms.

In the face of changing technological environment such as the availability of social media, Skype, virtual platforms and so on, students actively adopt or propose these tools for promoting and diversifying the ways of delivering internationalized curriculums and joint-training programs with universities worldwide (Sam, 2012). Furthermore, students can take the initiative to make themselves heard and understood through proactive participation

in classroom, actively asking for opportunities to present on their own culture and contributing ideas to lectures using their group's cultural examples and perspectives (Tran and Vu, 2018).

Intercultural support policies and extra-curricular programs

In response to social wellbeing needs of students, intercultural support policies and extra-curricular programs have been assessed to fuel students' strong sense of belongingness and loving care (Glass and Westmont, 2014) and self-respect, self-esteem. For instance, taking part in sport has been found an effective way to enhance social capital and recognition (Allen et al., 2010). Mixed-national groups for housing, teamwork in class, and extra-curricular activities would provide the proximity needed for students to enhance receptivity among the participants while institutionalized peer tutoring would usher in positive outcomes such as better language development, higher social adjustment, more satisfaction, improved attitudes, feeling of belongingness, intercultural appreciation (Hendrickson, 2018). Various services for supporting international students offered by international institutions such as counselling, peer tutoring or thematic clubs significantly encourage students to socialize and build their own network of connection much needed for getting support for accelerated integration into the multicultural environment.

In the process above, students not only proactively seek to participate in the activities facilitated by host institutions but also propose to get support in organizing events that could help them gain better psychological and social well-being. In some cases, students could even propose new courses or seminars/debates or extra-curricular activities that match their learning needs (Rankin-Dia, 2016). Regarding extra-curriculum programs, students take leading roles of and make decisions on their design and delivery (Nachatar Singh, 2019). As such, with their strong and positive impacts on students' intercultural adaptation, these specific programs and initiatives can be institutionalized in the training institutions' policies and strategies in their efforts to accelerate the internationalization of their educational and training programs.

3.2. Agency for becoming and self-transformation in intercultural contexts

As noted, agency for becoming refers to active engagement in students' self-transformation with their positioning process in terms of future aspirations and goals of intercultural adaptation, relationships to other actors, response strategies to requirements by different social forces and new ways of thinking and acting in new contexts (Biesta et al., 2015; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999; Hopwood, 2010). As such, this form of agency is developed by enabling students to construct their own aspirations and goals, agentively access available resources and support, actively build a stimulating environment for their intercultural adaptation.

Constructing future aspirations and goals of intercultural adaptation

Future aspirations and goals have been seen as inspiring motivations or dynamics of change in oneself and self-direction in intercultural adaptation (Callard, 2018). Accordingly, aspirations and goals seen as the core of agency in some way "motivated" are linked to the intention to bring about a future that is different from the present and the past (Biesta & Tedder, 2007). In this regard, aspirations and goals of intercultural adaptation for the majority of students are associated with the opportunities for good academic achievements, career progression, professional, personal development and high income, apart from the desire for adventure, travel, and life change (Cao & Tran, 2014; Blackmore, Gribble & Rahimi, 2015; King, Findlay & Ahrens, 2010). They are considered as the prevailing motivations for obtaining international experience from their participation in international training programs (Farcas & Gonçalves, 2017; Hoang & Tran, 2018). On the one hand, students strongly believe that professional life international experience enables them to become advanced and skilled in profession, and a better self (Yang & Noels, 2013; Tran 2015). Thus, the *professional life international experience* attracts students to be willing to pursue this international training program and make intercultural adaptation. On the other hand, students trust that personal life international experience significantly increases awareness and understanding of other cultures

and English language proficiency (Shao & Crook, 2015). So the *personal life international experience* makes them interested in getting to know and being in contact with other cultures, speaking a different language and experiencing living in a different environment (Farcas & Gonçalves, 2017).

Importantly, students should be inspired to actively engage in constructing their own aspirations and goals that self-direct their life-course in the interplay with influences from the past and orientations towards the future (Biesta et al., 2015; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). In this process, students' agency significantly enables their understanding of their inner self, or, their "way of being in, seeing and responding to the world" (Edwards, 2000). Moreover, Honneth (1995) pointed out that the precondition for self-chosen aspirations and goals is a positive self-relation, namely a degree of trust in oneself and one's abilities to set goals to embark upon particular plans of intercultural adaptation and to pursue these successfully. As such, students can be reinforced with this positive self-relation in intercultural environment by loving care and inspiration of concerned actors such as teachers, employers, parents and peers. On this basis, they develop their own future planning for fulfilling their aspirations and goals.

Accessing available resources and support

Agency of students in realizing their self-chosen aspirations and life goals of intercultural adaptation is expressed in the good positioning of their own intercultural assets and needed resources, and agentive access to available resources and support for achieving these aspirations and goals.

In order to fulfill aspirations and goals for good academic achievements, students need to make self-assessment of their own assets (including self-awareness and understanding of their own cultures and those related to their international training programs, intercultural communication skills and attitudes) that influence and direct their perceptions, emotions and actions in the intercultural environment (Berry et al., 2006). On this account, they understand what additional knowledge, skills and attitudes they should improve in order to effectively communicate with

their teachers and peers from different cultures. Furthermore, they actively navigate the ways to enrich their inadequate assets by their self-studying and seeking support from concerned actors, particularly their peers (Westwood & Baker, 1990)

Similarly, students need to be aware of how their own assets (including their culturally responsive professional knowledge, skills and competences) satisfy their targeted employers' requirements so as to realize their aspirations and goals for career progression and professional development in intercultural environment (Tran, 2016). On this account, they can work out a plan for preparing their readiness to become employable and to achieve their aspired employment or profession. For example, some students develop their personal capital and professional identity by taking various part-time jobs or internships to gain more knowledge and skills relevant to the labor market as well as to earn work experience that may make their résumés more attractive. Markedly, some students proactively reach out their potential employers for internships or apprenticeships so that they can boost their chances of finding relevant employment in the future (Tran et al., 2020).

On this journey, apart from their individual efforts in directly making changes in their own assets, students can actively contribute to transforming structural factors for improving their intercultural adaptation. For instance, they can actively share their values and cultural perspectives of learnt concepts that can help teachers to integrate them into their curriculum and pedagogy. Particularly, they can constructively propose the training institutions to promote their preparedness for students to enter into the world by strong connections with employers during the design and delivery of training programs. The practice shows that students even actively initiate and participate in developing a network of undergraduates, graduates, training institutions and employers nationally and internationally under the auspices and support of international training programs. With such a network, students have access to opportunities of international internships and part-time jobs that enable them to have valuable experiences while achieving strong dynamics and motivations of improving their

language proficiency and intercultural knowledge and communication skills (Farcas & Goncalves, 2017; Hoang & Tran, 2018; Tran et al., 2020).

Building a stimulating environment

As noted by Biesta et al. (2015), agency is the state of being active and taking shape in the actor's transaction with the surrounding "ecological" conditions and circumstances. To advance their intercultural adaptation and academic success, students actively engage in the development of a stimulating environment in which they can have a sense of belongingness and be emancipated in exposing their self-identity and cultures in communication. As such, students' agency is exhibited in terms of self-assessment of their current learning environment and its hindrance in their intercultural adaptations. On this account, they proactively elaborate extra-curricular events and programs to develop their desired emancipatory environment in which they can have feelings of belongingness and autonomy in their international training programs (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Hoang & Tran, 2018; Trinh & Conner, 2019).

Belongingness refers to a sense of connection with one's university, a strong support network, and a balance of academic challenge and support. Taylor (1992) stresses the critical significance of recognition of concrete individuality in intercultural adaptation. Individuals will become more acceptive of others when they feel confident about their cultural identity and feel secure with their place in society (Berry et al., 2021). Therefore, students should be equally treated and their cultures and self-identity are institutionalized in the training programs (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). Moreover, this environment facilitates them to have comfortable and caring interaction when they have their own rights in making decisions on which suggestions to follow and which to ignore (Hopwood, 2010). They actively initiate and organize cultural events, intercultural exchange and training programs, and community services that enhance a sense of belongingness and provide a secure base for the exploration of intercultural relationships (Glass and Westmont, 2014). Through these programs and events, students co-construct cultural other-awareness, reposition themselves and act as active agents in bridging existing gaps, assumed

to be within themselves and others, in mutual cultural understanding. As a result, a sense of belongingness is gradually achieved while their cultural identity and relationships with other social actors with whom they interact are reconstructed. In turn, students' feeling of being connected to others within the training institutions and the wider community and a sense of belonging to the education environment greatly reinforce their personal and psychological commitments in intercultural adaptation (Fredricks et al., 2004; Hoang & Tran, 2018, Trinh & Conner, 2019).

In addition, autonomy is a strong dynamic for students' active learning in their intercultural adaptation. It entails decision-making, critical reflection and social interaction (Little, 2003). Notably, learner autonomy is "the product of interdependence rather than independence", which underscores the dynamics between collective and individual actions (Little, 1994). In this meaning, students socially construct their intercultural knowledge and new perspectives by actively engaging in the process of learning and critical reflection. In this view, self-directness, critical reflection and cognitive engagement through social interactions are the key principles of autonomous learning environment for self-transformation (Lee, 2011). In such an autonomous learning environment, students take an active role in making decisions on which cultural values and perspectives they want to self-express and adopt to construct learnt concepts in class or points of view in social interaction. In this process, they work collaboratively with others through which they make intercultural adaptation by observing, analyzing and self-reflecting information.

Moreover, in the autonomous environment, students can decide to open a social forum and network where they can share and exchange intercultural perspectives with stakeholders from different backgrounds. These supportive networks can serve as a source of information for developing cultural knowledge and experiences necessary for adjusting to international training programs (Wilson et al., 2013; Bodycott et al., 2013).

4. Conclusion

Although some models, to some extents,

stress the individual agency as a key to successful intercultural adaptation such as the Anxiety/Uncertainty Management (AUM) model developed by Gudykunst (1995), they seem to primarily focus on the psychological perspective of this adaptation process. In such a process, individual's mindfulness or deliberate cognition of cultural differences and constant adjustment plays an important role instead of "operating on an autopilot". Based on AUM, Godykunst (1998) conducted series of training programs in which trainees would be equipped with understandings about the way their abilities in management of uncertainty and anxiety would influence their adaptation to new cultures before being instructed as for how to successfully manage anxiety and uncertainty. However, such a training program is rather focused on individuals instead of paying more comprehensive attention to individuals' initiative in the interaction with their intercultural ecology.

This paper contributes a new conceptual model of intercultural adaptation development for students of international training programs in higher education in an ecological circumstance. This model examines intercultural adaptation as a self-transformation process in interplay with students' agency reinforcement that is determined by structural and affective recognition. Accordingly, "needs-response agency" refers to students' active engagement in the provision of internationalized curriculum, culturally responsive pedagogy, intercultural support policies and extra-curricular programs in

order to meet their intercultural learning, social and wellbeing needs. Meanwhile, "agency for becoming" is deemed as the ability to control, direct their future life by self-positioning future aspirations and goals, agentive access to available resources and support and creating a stimulating environment. Creating a space for students to actively exercise their agency in international training programs is recognized as a requisite condition for their self-transformation in intercultural adaptation. As such, training institutions need to provide opportunities of "par participation" of students from different backgrounds in training institutions through a supportive policy environment in terms of internationalized curriculum, professional development for teaching staff, intercultural support policies and extra-curricular programs. Furthermore, nurturing a stimulating environment and positive intercultural relations between students, teaching staff, employers and society is critical to reinforce students' sense of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem so as to secure their successful intercultural adaptation.

Based on this conceptual framework, future capacity building programs of intercultural adaptation can be designed with the emphasis on students' agency development. Moreover, this framework can help to navigate future research on institutional conditions that are requisite for the successful intercultural adaptation of students and concerned stakeholders in the educational settings.

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