



**International Journal of Education, Social Studies,
And Management (IJESSM)**

e-ISSN : 2775-4154

Volume 4, Issue 2, June 2024

The International Journal of Education, Social Studies, and Management (IJESSM) is published 3 times a year (**February, June, November**).

Focus : Education, Social, Economy, Management, And Culture.

LINK : <http://lppipublishing.com/index.php/ijessm>

**U-Curve Analysis of Cultural Adaptation in IISMA Warwick
Students: The Impact of Time Constraints on
the Adjustment Process**

**Adventius Mayvero Benung¹, Narendra Nizam Aldien², Azlia Ramadhani³,
Aisyah Puspita Ramadhania⁴**

^{1,2,3} *Universitas Brawijaya, Indonesia*

⁴ *Universitas Airlangga, Indonesia*

ABSTRACT

This research focuses on the process of cultural adaptation experienced by students who received the IISMA scholarship and studied at Warwick University in the United Kingdom. These students participated in an international exchange program that lasted only one semester, which created unique time constraints compared to longer-term programs. Using the U-Curve theory as a framework, this research applies a qualitative approach by conducting structured interviews with four IISMA Warwick awardees to better understand how students adapt in a short period of time. The findings show that most students went through the typical phases of the U-Curve theory—honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and mastery. However, because of the limited duration of their stay, these phases happened more quickly than what is usually expected. Many students entered the adjustment phase much earlier than predicted, although none of them had fully reached the mastery phase. The awareness of having only a short time abroad pushed them to respond more quickly and actively to challenges such as language barriers, academic differences, and social adjustments. This research highlights the need to revise or adapt traditional cultural adjustment models for short-term programs. Since few studies have explored how students adapt under strict time constraints, especially in one-semester programs, this research provides an original contribution. It also emphasizes the importance of creating contextual support systems that match the fast-paced nature of short-term cultural adaptation experiences.

IISMA, U-Curve, Time Constraints, Warwick University, Cultural Adaptation

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received

05 April 2025

Revised


15 May 2025

Accepted

25 May 2025

Keywords

Corresponding

Author : 

adventiusmay@student.ub.ac.id

INTRODUCTION

The phrase *culture shock* was first coined by Oberg in 1960. He explained that culture shock is responsible for the sense of bewilderment and psychological unease as they are exposed to a culture so new and alien to their

own. The experience of being in a new cultural setting that has varying social values, habits, and customs typically causes psychological disorientation through stress, anxiety, and confusion (Oberg, 1960, as cited in Jambo, 2024). Isolation, frustration, and homesickness are also common responses to the variation of cultures (Palamarchuk & Vaillancourt, 2021). Any individual may be subject to said culture shock, which in this particular study means Indonesian foreign exchange students at Warwick University, United Kingdom.

Indonesian students who are used to the national education system are very likely to encounter culture shock if they choose to study abroad. Differences in the host nation's education system, patterns of communication, social norms, and daily life culture are overwhelming barriers. The differences impact not only students' studies but also their daily social life as they get used to the new environment. These problems become more complicated when one understands that some exchange students need to adapt within certain time constraints while studying. It is therefore necessary to understand Indonesian students' adaptation process when undergoing culture shock while studying abroad, especially those undergoing short-term exchange programs.

One of the exchange programs Indonesian students can use to study abroad is the Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA). IISMA is a scholarship program carried out by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology (Kemdikbud Ristek) in accordance with the Merdeka Belajar Kampus Merdeka policy. The scholarship allows students to register and learn at the world's top foreign universities for a semester of study and further broaden their horizons (IISMA, 2023). In addition to tuition fee exemption, IISMA also offers a living allowance to facilitate the students, who can then focus on the cultural exchange process during their stay.

This study focuses on how Indonesian IISMA scholarship recipients at Warwick University, United Kingdom, adapt to a new cultural environment within a time constraint of only four months. The adaptation process is analyzed using the U-Curve model. The U-Curve Adjustment Hypothesis describes how individuals adjust to new cultures in a U-shaped pattern. It outlines four phases: honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and mastery (Lysgaard, 1955, as cited in Black & Mendenhall, 1991).

Furthermore, this study provides a fresh perspective by focusing on the adaptation process of IISMA students at Warwick University during a one-semester international exchange program, an area that has received little to no specific academic attention. By exploring how students adjust culturally within a limited timeframe, the study aims to fill a significant gap in the literature on short-term exchange programs. Unlike previous research, such as Iskhakova et

al. (2021), which highlighted the benefits of short-term programs for cultural intelligence but did not deeply examine the adaptation process itself, this study investigates whether awareness of time constraints influences how students adapt. The findings are expected to offer deeper insights into the challenges faced by students and to inform the development of more effective support policies or programs in the future.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative method to gain an in-depth understanding of the cultural adaptation experiences of Indonesian International Student Mobility Awards (IISMA) recipients at Warwick University. Qualitative research allows the researcher to interpret social realities and explore phenomena in a descriptive manner (Pujileksono, 2015). The main focus of this study is to analyze the culture shock phase in the adaptation process using the U-Curve Adjustment Hypothesis (Black & Mendenhall, 1991) and to examine whether awareness of time limitations can accelerate students' adaptation in a new cultural environment.

Informants were selected using purposive sampling. Four 2024 IISMA recipients at Warwick University were chosen as the main informants based on their direct experience in facing cultural challenges during the semester. These students were Muhammad Syafiq Fadli Rahman, Yasmin Humaira Putri, Mahisa Naraya Sakti, and Alessandra Oktaviani Sie. Structured interviews were used for data collection. The questions were prepared in advance, asked to each informant, and assessed using a predetermined rubric to reduce information bias (Bergelson, Tracy, & Takacs, 2022). The interview questions focused on students' experiences across each phase of the adaptation process – honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and mastery as outlined in the U-Curve theory. Interviews were completed through online communication platforms such as Zoom to ensure flexibility and data accuracy.

The collected data was analyzed using the Thematic Analysis method, a qualitative technique aimed at identifying, organizing, and interpreting meaningful patterns or themes from the interview data. In this research, the thematic analysis followed a deductive approach, where the interview findings were systematically compared to the cultural adaptation phases in the U-Curve model by Lysgaard (1955, as cited in Black & Mendenhall, 1991). This model includes four main phases: the honeymoon phase, the culture shock phase, the adjustment phase, and the mastery phase.

During the analysis, the key characteristics of each phase were identified based on the literature. Then, each informant's narrative was examined to find

symptoms or indicators corresponding to those phases. If a student's experiences aligned with the traits of a certain phase, they were considered to have entered that phase. This method allowed for a deeper mapping of each individual's adaptation process based on the progression of the U-Curve.

In addition to primary data from interviews, this study also uses literature reviews to bolster the analysis. The literature review was conducted by examining academic journals, conference proceedings, books, and publications related to cultural adaptation and international exchange programs (M. Patel & N. Patel, 2019). This approach intends to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how awareness of time constraints influence the accelerated adaptation of IISMA students in a different cultural environment.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As a framework to understand how IISMA students adapt at Warwick University, the U-curve model gives a clear picture of the emotional and psychological phases that people usually go through when they face a new culture. The model explains four main phases: honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and mastery (Lysgaard, 1955 in Black & Mendenhall, 1991). In the honeymoon phase, students often feel excited and interested in their new surroundings because everything seems new, different, and enjoyable. They may be amazed by cultural differences and motivated to explore their environment. However, this feeling usually fades when they enter the culture shock phase. At this stage, people may feel confused, frustrated, or even lonely. They can struggle to understand local habits, language use, or the social rules that are very different from what they are used to.

The next phase, adjustment, is when students begin to adapt more effectively. They start to understand how people interact, they feel more confident when speaking or participating in class, and they find better ways to manage daily tasks. Although some challenges may remain, students can build routines and feel more comfortable. The final phase, mastery, shows that a person has fully adapted to the culture and can function well in both social and academic life. However, for IISMA students at Warwick who only study abroad for about four months, reaching this final phase can be very difficult. The short time frame limits how deeply they can adjust, especially if earlier phases take longer. That is why it is important to explore how each student experiences these phases during their time in the program, and how time constraints might shape the adaptation process.

Honeymoon Phase

In the honeymoon phase, all four participants clearly showed signs of being in the early stage of the U-curve model, marked by excitement about their new cultural environment in the UK. This phase usually includes positive feelings, curiosity, and strong interest in differences compared to their home country. Alessandra Oktaviani Sie was amazed by the house designs and clean air, calling it a “new world,” showing her appreciation for the physical setting—something rare in Indonesia. Mahisa Naraya Sakti admired the historical architecture, seeing it as rich in cultural value and very attractive. In the academic area, Muhammad Syafiq Fadli Rahman and Yasmin Humaira Putri were impressed by the education system and modern campus facilities, which they felt supported productivity. These reactions reflect typical features of the honeymoon phase, showing that the students were starting their cultural adaptation journey with enthusiasm and admiration.

The students’ active efforts to explore new habits and practices further confirm that they were in the honeymoon phase. They didn’t just observe – they took part in cultural experiences. Yasmin was excited to try local foods like scones, which she continued enjoying back in Indonesia. Alessandra joined a welcome party, where she learned British table manners in a fun and educational setting. Mahisa adjusted to eating potatoes instead of rice, showing openness to local food customs. Syafiq saw grocery shopping not only as fun but also as a way to connect with people and grow his social circle. These actions show that the students were active cultural explorers, not just passive observers.

Their awareness of the program’s short duration also influenced how actively they explored. While their views on time varied, all were aware that their stay would not be long. Mahisa said that limited time pushed him to meet more people and explore more places. Alessandra, although not directly mentioning time, knew the program had an end date and chose to enjoy non-academic experiences like traveling and attending cultural events. Yasmin noted that her stay was longer than some others', but she still used her time with strong motivation. These examples show that both clear and subtle awareness of time limits encouraged the students to adapt and explore more quickly, making the most of their experience.

From the interviews, it’s clear that the participants were fully in the honeymoon phase. This phase usually happens in the first one to two months of living abroad. Their admiration for the environment, excitement to try new things, and willingness to join social life show their place in this early stage of adaptation. Their motivation was not just personal but also driven by time

awareness, which made them more intentional about using every opportunity. For programs like IISMA, this shows the value of giving students space for both academic and cultural experiences to support their full development.

The honeymoon phase for IISMA students at Warwick was clearly full of energy and cultural discovery. The short program duration acted as a strong push for them to explore, make connections, and build lasting memories. This highlights the importance of understanding the honeymoon phase in studies of cultural adaptation. Although often seen as a fun period, it also brings pressure to “make the most of the time.” Recognizing this can help program organizers provide better support as students move into later phases of adaptation.

Culture Shock Phase

The culture shock phase experienced by IISMA students at the University of Warwick—although theoretically lasting between three to nine months—revealed unique dynamics due to the limited study period of just one semester, or approximately four months. Based on the interviews, the initial challenges the students encountered during their adaptation period included language barriers (as described by Muhammad Syafiq), changes in dietary habits and the need to manage household responsibilities independently (Yasmin), fluctuations in weather that affected personal health amidst growing academic demands (Mahisa), and significant differences in teaching methods and social habits (Alessandra). These issues served as early indicators of disorientation and difficulty in navigating a new cultural environment that was markedly different from their experiences in Indonesia.

Furthermore, the culture shock phase was marked by feelings of being overwhelmed and struggling to adapt, even though not all participants experienced significant homesickness. Muhammad Syafiq, for example, felt burdened by the unexpected number of opportunities and events, which clashed with an already demanding schedule, further intensified by obligations from Indonesia. Yasmin, although she did not experience strong feelings of homesickness, reported suffering from the winter blues and mounting academic pressure, especially due to the individual nature of coursework, which contrasted with her previous experience. Mahisa's main challenge lay in adapting to the cold weather, which had a direct impact on his health. Meanwhile, Alessandra found it difficult to establish friendships with local students and noted substantial differences in social interaction styles compared to those in Indonesia. These difficult moments illustrate the emotional and psychological pressures typical of the culture shock phase.

Interview data also revealed that a conscious awareness of their limited time abroad began to emerge around the two-month mark (according to

Muhammad Syafiq), or was triggered by approaching academic deadlines (as noted by Yasmin). This growing awareness encouraged the students to seek solutions more proactively. Muhammad Syafiq recognized the importance of forming connections and engaging with peers early on to avoid further isolation. Yasmin responded by prioritizing task completion despite the pressure of deadlines. Mahisa opted for a gradual, step-by-step approach to overcoming challenges, in order to maintain mental and physical well-being. Alessandra emphasized the role of self-awareness in accelerating adaptation, while acknowledging that individuals differ in their levels of awareness and capacity to adjust.

Specific strategies aimed at quick adaptation—motivated by the short duration of their stay—were also shared by the participants. Muhammad Syafiq, for instance, used his nights to finish assignments and explore campus facilities that could support his learning. Yasmin found that working in lively public spaces enhanced her productivity, prompting her to choose social environments for studying. Mahisa took the initiative to read additional journal articles to compensate for modules that did not match his academic background. Alessandra underscored the importance of adjusting one's mindset to embrace and enjoy the new culture as a fundamental aspect of adapting successfully. These strategies reflect the students' proactive responses in maximizing their limited time while navigating the psychological and academic demands of culture shock.

These findings align with previous studies, which suggest that social support from local communities and a positive acculturation attitude can significantly accelerate the adaptation process for students in short-term academic programs (Kingminghae & Lin, 2023). In the case of IISMA students at the University of Warwick, awareness of their time constraints played a crucial role in encouraging more proactive and efficient responses to cultural challenges, both in academic and social aspects.

Based on the findings, it can be concluded that the IISMA students at the University of Warwick entered the culture shock phase, which was characterized by disorientation, psychological stress, and various adaptation challenges in both daily life and academic contexts. Although this phase typically lasts longer in most cases, the short-term nature of the program accelerated the transition. Their growing awareness of time limitations served as a key trigger for adaptive responses and proactive strategies. Instead of remaining trapped in the discomfort of the initial adjustment period, the students sought ways to understand, accept, and navigate their new environment more swiftly and effectively.

Adjustment Phase

The adjustment phase reveals how IISMA students at the University of Warwick began to adapt to their new cultural environment despite the limited study period of only four months. Based on interview data, three of the four participants (Syafiq, Mahisa, and Alessandra) displayed classic signs of the adjustment phase, such as feeling more comfortable, building new routines, and adopting a more open mindset toward cultural differences. Syafiq, for example, shared that over time he was better able to adapt to daily activities after developing social relationships, although his initial focus was still tied to responsibilities in Indonesia. This marks a shift from initial discomfort toward better social integration—one of the key features of the adjustment phase in the U-Curve model. The awareness of limited time served as a crucial factor that accelerated their drive to adapt.

Mahisa and Alessandra explicitly mentioned that, due to their awareness of time constraints, they became more proactive in expanding their social networks and seeking support from peers. This reinforces the finding that the short program duration pushed IISMA students to fast-track their adjustment phase, which in the original theory (10–48 months) typically takes much longer. Instead of waiting for the adaptation process to unfold naturally, students took deliberate steps such as asking for help more often, participating in group projects, or expanding their networks. This suggests that time awareness not only influenced but also modified the shape and speed of their adjustment process. In terms of behavior and mindset shifts, all participants adopted personal strategies to accelerate their adaptation.

Yasmin, for example, used the approach of “living everyday like you're a tourist,” a mindset that helped her see small things more positively and facilitated emotional adjustment. Meanwhile, Mahisa relied on detailed planning to balance academic and social demands. Alessandra emphasized the importance of flexibility and openness when dealing with new expectations in the UK. These strategies demonstrate that IISMA students were not passive recipients of the adjustment process but actively shaped it, responding to challenges within a shorter timeframe than suggested by traditional U-Curve theory.

These findings are consistent with previous research indicating that international students with high reflective awareness and active coping strategies tend to experience cultural adjustment more quickly (Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). The study concluded that not just duration but also individuals' cognitive and behavioral approaches play a key role in the effectiveness of cross-cultural adaptation.

However, time limitations also placed constraints on the depth of adjustment. Some respondents, such as Syafiq, expressed regret for not being able to build deeper social relationships. This indicates that although the adjustment phase was achieved in certain aspects, parts of the experience felt rushed and lacked maturity. In this context, the adjustment appears to be more functional (managing daily life) than emotional (feeling a full sense of belonging). This is consistent with the theory that ideal adjustment typically requires a longer period, and within a one-semester program, students are more likely to reach only the basic level of this phase.

Overall, this study shows that the awareness of limited time significantly influenced the adaptation process of IISMA students at the University of Warwick. Instead of following a gradual, standard adjustment curve, these students accelerated their transition into the adjustment phase by adopting active strategies, new mindsets, and rapidly building social networks. However, this limited timeframe also restricted the depth of adjustment they could achieve, with some students acknowledging a lack of deeper, more meaningful social experiences. These findings enrich our understanding of how a short program duration drives students not only to experience cultural adaptation but also to manage it consciously and strategically.

Mastery Phase

The mastery phase in the U-Curve model describes a deep level of cultural adaptation, where a person can live and function well in both social and academic life in the new culture. However, for IISMA students at Warwick University, who join the program for only one semester or about four months, this phase is usually not fully reached. According to theory, it takes about 49 months or more to fully reach the mastery phase, depending on how intense and meaningful a person's cross-cultural experiences are. Even so, interviews show signs pointing toward this phase, such as deeper adaptation and the continuation of habits that students bring back to Indonesia. Because of this, the study uses a projective approach to explore the mastery phase by looking at the possibility of reaching it through adaptation patterns during the short program.

Interview results show that although participants did not fully blend into British culture, some daily habits, like meal prepping, using inclusive pronouns, and planning tasks more systematically have become more natural. These habits show early signs of internalizing new cultural practices, which could develop into full mastery if more time were available. For example, Muhammad Syafiq now cooks more efficiently, and Yasmin has changed the way she thinks and completes tasks in a more organized way. These examples show cultural learning that goes deeper than surface-level adjustment.

Some participants also developed stronger intercultural awareness. They became better at respecting different opinions, interacting with people from various backgrounds, and responding to social situations with more empathy. This shows growth in cultural sensitivity, which is a key part of reaching mastery. The students began to understand not only what was different but also why these differences existed. This kind of awareness has the potential to grow into strong intercultural competence over time.

However, full mastery still seems limited by time. Syafiq, for instance, said he hadn't fully understood the local culture yet and hadn't had the chance to explore things like "pub culture," an important part of British social life. This supports the idea that limited time is a major barrier to reaching true mastery. Adapting to local values and habits takes ongoing exposure, which cannot happen completely in just four months—especially compared to the estimated 49 months often needed. These findings match research by Demes and Geeraert (2015), which shows that psychological and sociocultural adjustment needs a high level of interaction. Their study found that although early signs of integration may appear, real mastery needs enough time to experience the full complexity of a different culture.

Even so, the interviews also showed that knowing time was limited pushed some students to adapt more actively. Mahisa and Alessandra, for example, saw the short program as a rare opportunity, so they became more open and quick in accepting the new culture. Alessandra said it is important not to be afraid of opening up to a new world, which shows cultural resilience—a helpful trait for reaching mastery. Mahisa also said he felt motivated to adjust quickly so he wouldn't waste the chance, which is an intensive adaptation strategy that could speed up internalizing values.

In conclusion, although full mastery was not reached in this study, the participants' adaptation process suggests movement in that direction. Using a projective approach, we can say that IISMA students have strong potential to reach mastery if given more time. Also, this study found that knowing time is limited can motivate students to take initiative faster in adapting, although the depth of adaptation still depends on how much and how deeply they interact with the culture during the program

CONCLUSION

The results of this study show that the IISMA students at Warwick University adapted more quickly through the cultural adaptation process than the average time defined in the U-Curve theory by Lysgaard. Even though phases like honeymoon and culture shock still existed, the students tended to

move faster toward the adjustment phase. This pace was most likely set by their awareness of their time constraints – four months of foreign living – and caused them to make adjustments quickly, not only academically but also socially.

When the students were at the honeymoon phase, they showed extreme enthusiasm towards new cultures and enthusiastically explored the new environment surrounding them. However, when they moved to the culture shock phase, they had problems such as language barriers, differences in the educational system, and even the weather. Nevertheless, since they were aware of their short-term stay, the students necessarily adopted more practical adaptation strategies, such as building social networks at the earliest and adjusting academic aspirations.

In the adjustment phase, respondents showed typical patterns of adaptation, from changes in daily behavior to adopting a more open mindset. Strategies like making efficient schedules, finding supportive study environments, and building social connections were done consciously. This shows that the students were not just “experiencing” adaptation but were also actively “managing” the process in order to get the best results within a short period. The adaptation achieved was functional, but not yet deep.

Meanwhile, the mastery phase cannot be said to be fully reached due to the short program duration. However, there were signs of internalizing new cultural values, such as lifestyle changes, adopting the principle of efficiency, and being more open to cultural diversity. These findings support the idea that four months is enough to trigger an early integration process, even if it is not long enough to fully embed into the local culture, as assumed in the mastery phase. Therefore, the adaptation of IISMA participants tends to stop at the phase of early integration, rather than full mastery.

As a follow-up to these findings, it is important for future research to explore further the dynamics behind the fast adaptation process experienced by exchange students within a limited time. The impression that awareness of limited time can create an internal push to adapt quickly deserves more attention. On the other hand, it is also possible that this acceleration is related to the personal characteristics of IISMA students, who may have above-average adaptive abilities. Psychological factors such as resilience, self-regulation, and intrinsic motivation are worth exploring further in this context. By combining a longitudinal approach and expanding the research to various countries and cultural backgrounds, future studies are expected to identify more comprehensive adaptation patterns. This effort would be very useful for designing more targeted and responsive support programs for students in short-term exchange programs.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Deep appreciation is extended to Muhammad Syafiq Fadli Rahman, Yasmin Humaira Putri, Mahisa Naraya Sakti, and Alessandra Oktaviani, participants of the 2024 IISMA program at Warwick University, for their significant contributions as informants in this research. Their time, thoughtful reflections, and willingness to share personal experiences added considerable depth and authenticity to the analysis. The insights offered, spanning personal adaptation journeys to critical cultural reflections, provided a multifaceted understanding of international student mobility within a compressed academic timeframe. These contributions played a vital role in refining the conceptual approach and expanding the analytical lens of the research. The knowledge gained is intended not only to inform future academic inquiry but also to support global initiatives aimed at enhancing intercultural competence and adaptive learning in international education programs.

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