



## PROPOSING A NEW CONSTRUCT: ACADEMIC CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN STUDYING ABROAD

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### **Abstract:**

The present study is an attempt to introduce, define and explore a new construct called Academic Cultural Diversity (ACD) through narrative-interviewing the first year International Students (FIS) as well as the lecturers' of the University of Pecs, Hungary (UP). Up to 2015, according to the monthly newsletter published by UP, 2,500 international students came to study at UP. This figure was impressive enough to encourage me to explore if the diversity of their academic cultural background boost or hinder them reaching their study abroad expectations, goals and achievements. A close look at their exam results in the first year indicates that a large proportion of them get extremely low score and fail the exams several times over their first study abroad academic year. As an example, on the basis of the evidence currently available, 68 out of 79 (86%) FIS majoring in Pharmacy at the UP who took the exam course "Analytical chemistry" in 2016, failed and had to re-take the course in the next semester. To address the mentioned problem, the present study is an attempt (i) to explore the most common and crucial ACD faced by FIS at the UP from students' perspective (ii) from their lecturers' perspective (iii) to see how similar or different they view the notion "low academic performance" of FIS (iv) to introduce and define ACD as a new construct in the field based on the available literature and the findings of the current study. Thirty international students from 30 countries and five university lecturers at the UP participated in this study to uncover the key factors of the low academic performance of FIS. A narrative interviewing as a means of data collection was administered to elicit data from both students and their lecturers with regards to their present and past experiences for further analysis and comparison. The results are significant in three respects: (i) ACD is an absolute context-specific notion which can boost or hinder FIS

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academic performance across contexts (ii) Lecturers and FIS are different in their opinion in the way that some of their different beliefs diverge dramatically, and often do.

**Keywords:** academic cultural diversity (ACD), first year international students (FIS), low academic performance

## 1. Introduction

The literature in this text consists of three sections. Firstly, the key concepts of the study are defined. Secondly, the previous studies with the focus of the identification of academic cultural challenges will be discussed. Finally, some major studies in the literature that have responded this type of challenge will be reviewed.

## 2. Definitions of key concepts

The term 'culture' has been defined in numerous ways in the literature. Bean (2008) argues that there is a general agreement on the following broad definition of 'culture' on which the current study relies.

*"Culture refers to the total learned and transmitted cultural domain of a social, including social differences stemming from nationality, ethnicity, race, religion, arts, language, gender, and generational differences, histories and socioeconomic status"* (Bean, 2008, p. 12).

*'Cultural diversity'*, on the other hand, refers to the "existence of a variety of cultural or ethnic groups within a society" (Oxford dictionary, 2015). To be academic-specific, based on the extensive literature and the findings of the present study,

*Academic Cultural Diversity (ACD)* is defined as follows: *ACD: A cultural hindrance to education for students with different educational background who are unlikely to adapt to the new academic setting.*

The present study highlights common academic challenges that international students face in the context of the University of Pecs in Hungary through a narrative interviewing from both international students' and their lecturer' lens.

## 3. Theoretical framework

Since 1997, due to globalization, the number of international students has increased significantly (Nakar, 2013). As the result of the significant increase of the international student enrollment, the quality of education outcome in the study abroad context has put in question. In the literature, study abroad challenges are mainly associated with diversity in culture-related factors and language-related factors, to put it simply, the

difficulty in speaking the local language. In an academic city, the more local people speak English, the fewer obligations will be put to learn the local language for the international students, and therefore language-related challenges would play a negligible role. In this respect, although in Hungary, *“The political landslide of 1989 hugely increased language learning motivation, and Hungary’s accession to the European Union (EU) in 2004 speeded up this process”* (Nikolov & Medgyes, 2014, p. 505), many international students still complain of having to learn the local language in order to be able to make their daily communication both on-campus and off-campus. In terms of academic cultural diversity (ACD) in a globalized context, Nayak and Venkatraman (2010,P.5) believe that *“curriculum are not specifically tailored to the learning needs of international students”*. In this regard, Marginson and Eijman (2007) put a strong emphasis on the necessity to design internationalized curricula to acknowledge the various academic needs of international students within their new academic setting. In this sense, international students with different cultural backgrounds necessitate the implementation of curricula that accept and admit this diversity. This view has been supported by many, including Guthrie (2009, P. 8) whose Detailed examination of internationalization of Vocational Education and Training (VET) showed that *“the learning and the assessment processes of Competency-Based-Training and Assessment (CBTA) simply immersed in a compliant context that in fact hindered the adoption of the international VET curriculum”*. In a similar way, the study by Mitchell and Young (2001) suggests that teachers at particular lack sufficient skills regarding course delivery and designing assignments for international students within an intercultural context. In terms of teachers’ challenges in this area, there has been relatively little empirical literature published on the recognition of the teachers’ challenges (Rehm, 2008) particularly on their need to address cultural challenges that play an essential role in international students’ work knowledge and skill development in their new academic setting. This means that in such an international academic setting within a globalized context, finding a balance between the various learning styles of international students due to their cultural diversity and developing culturally inclusive practices in the teaching stuff is crucial. However, introducing “Cross-Cultural training” (See next section) was a reaction to respond the academic challenges stemmed from international students’ cultural diversity. It suggests a few points that have been applied in response to the challenge as follow.

### **3.1 Responding the challenge; Cross-cultural training (CCT)**

Research to date has tended to focus on teachers’ attitude towards cultural diversity. In this respect, three models of Cross-Cultural training for the teachers are discussed in this text. First, Tung (1981) proposed a framework which helps decide the nature and level of rigor of training on two variables:

1. The degree of interaction between the parent and the host unit.

2. The culture novelty, implying how different (novel) is the culture of the expatriate from that of the host unit.

The second model is built on the Tung's model by Mandelhall & Oddou's (1985). This model includes 3 key elements: Training methods, Low, medium and the high levels of training rigour, and the duration of training relative to degree of interaction and culture novelty. The third model was introduced by Black and Mendel (1989), in which the three elements of the social learning theory (attention, retention and reproduction) were taken into consideration in order to demonstrate how these elements are influenced and interact by individual differences in foreign students' expectations and motivation and the incentives to apply learnt behavior in a new academic setting.

Garmon argues that *"the features that led to teachers' success with culturally diverse students are disposition towards openness, appreciation of differences and eagerness to engage in new experiences"* (Cited in Rehm, 2008, p.47). In addition, Rehm (2008) believes, teachers with qualities as such have a stronger tendency to adopt diverse approaches to reach their goals, hence enabling students to succeed. In order to make this possible, (Pusch, 1981) pioneered in suggesting some training that has been applied for the teachers called Cross-cultural training (CCT). Therefore, first introduced by (Pusch, 1981), cross-cultural training aimed at enabling teachers to develop their awareness, knowledge and skills which were needed to be culturally competent in inter-cultural situations. He described CCT as a multi-faceted approach to increasing the knowledge and skills required to adjust to a new culture. Previous national and international of cross cultural training were predominantly restricted to specific fields or focus on specific areas such as indigenous cultural issues or health services and were generally in small scale (Bean, 2008). Quantitative studies have proved inconclusive, leading to a strong emphasis on qualitative data and a study of participants at various points in their development of cultural competence. (Bawhuk & Brislin, 2000; Bean, 2008; Black & Mendenlahh, 1990; Hammer, 2003; Martin & Nakayama, 2004). Over time, the concept of cross cultural training has been put under a significant consideration. In recent years, there has also been an increasing demand for cross-cultural training and recognition of the roles that education systems play in developing both social capital and human capital (McGaw, 2006).

#### **4. The present study**

The present study is an attempt to firstly, highlight common academic challenges that international students face, due to their Academic Cultural Diversity (ACD), and secondly, responds identified ACD through suggesting CCT to the teachers who teach a large number of international students and hence, struggle with how to deal with them. However, applying CCT id not a focus of the current study. As for the context of the

study, Duff argues, *“In modern scientific research and particularly in applied linguistics, research has begun to show greater pluralism and rigor, an increased sensitivity to the contexts of research”* (2010, p.21). The ACD under scrutiny in the present study is within context of the University of Pecs in Hungary where approximately 2500 international students study and hence a considerable academic inter-cultural diversity is undeniable. The available evidence provided by the platform of the UP called ‘Neptun’ seems to suggest the impact of academic diversity is more obvious than ever before particularly in the medical fields. The data yielded from Neptune supports the claim that the percentage of the international students in UP majoring in medical fields and some engineering is not satisfactory, especially in their first two years (Appendix A, B and C). To be specific, In 2016, 68 out of 79 (86%) first year international students majoring in Pharmacy at the UP who took an exam course called “Analytical chemistry”, failed and had to re-take the course on the next semester (appendix B). Having taken the re-take exam, 49 out of 68 (72%) students failed again (Appendix B) and consequently had to repeat the course which is a prerequisite to some other courses. Another example in another course, for the course “Pharmaceutical terminology” in one group 13 out of 26 test takers (50%), failed to gain the minimum pass score (Appendix C). In contrast, the local students (Hungarian students) who are majoring in the same fields and same academic years show way greater academic performances than their international counterparts in the same University and context. Another significant issue is the way some lecturers disclose and publish the test takers’ scores on the University’s platform (Neptun) in semi-public way. To put it simply, each student’s score can be seen by everyone in their group, however, not every teacher publish the scores as such. This method of sharing students’ scores can be regarded as an ACD that strongly stand against some students’ academic cultural background such as American students. To identify the international students’ academic challenges the following research questions are proposed.

## 5. Research Questions

1. What are the most common and crucial academic cultural differences (ACDs) faced by the first year international students at the University of Pecs (UP) from the students’ perspective?
2. What are the most common and crucial ACDs faced by the first year international students in the UP from the lecturers’ perspective?
3. How similar or different are the lecturers’ and international students’ views with regard to the common ACDs faced by first year international students in the UP?

## 6. Participants

Thirty international students (14 male and 16 female aged 20 to 26) each from one country who reside in a dormitory called “Szanto” in Pecs and five Hungarian lecturers in the UP participated in this study. Szanto dormitory is a five-story building in which international students from more than 50 countries are settled. I managed to choose the participants from 30 different countries to elicit data from a diverse ethnic and academic background to boost the reliability of the findings in terms of nationalities as well as its representativeness.

The lecturers are all Hungarian, while the student participants in the present study come from the following countries: Albania, Azerbaijan, Algeria, Armenia, Brazil, China, Croatia, Egypt, England, France, Germany, Greece, India, Iran, Jordan, Japan, Kosovo, Mexico, Morocco, Moldova, Nigeria, Norway, the Philippines, Pakistan, Palestine, Russia, South Korea, Syria, Turkey, Tunisia, Laos, U.S.A.

All students and teachers received a form of consent (based on The British Association for Applied Linguistics, 2006) to ensure them that their data would be used up anonymously and for research purposes exclusively (Appendix C).

Five Hungarian lecturers who are currently teaching in the UP also participated in the study (Four male one female aged 50 to 60). Since the narrative interview was administered in English, all of the participants were selected from those who could speak and write in English well. Table 1 demonstrates the demographics of thirty students who participated in the study. And table 2 illustrates the lecturer participants’ demographics.

**Table 1:** Demographics of the Students

Student Number	Age	Gender	Nationality
1	18	Male	England
2	23	Male	Greece
3	20	Male	Iran
4	25	Male	India
5	21	Male	Laos
6	23	Male	Tunisia
7	26	Male	Turkey
8	20	Male	Syria
9	21	Male	South Korea
10	20	Male	Palestine
11	20	Male	Pakistan
12	19	Male	The Philippines
13	24	Male	Nigeria
14	20	Male	Moldova
15	20	Male	Morocco
16	23	Female	Mexico
17	22	Female	Japan

18	24	Female	Jordan
19	26	Female	Germany
20	21	Female	France
21	26	Female	Egypt
22	25	Female	Croatia
23	20	Female	China
24	23	Female	Brazil
25	21	Female	Armenia
26	21	Female	Algeria
27	26	Female	Azerbaijan
28	25	Female	Albania
29	21	Female	USA
30	24	Female	Russia

**Table 2.** Demographic of the lecturer participants

Lecturer's Number	Age	Gender	Nationality
1	51	Male	Hungarian
2	57	Male	Hungarian
3	60	Male	Hungarian
4	50	Male	Hungarian
5	57	Female	Hungarian

## 7. Research methodology

As a qualitative means of data collection, a narrative inquiry in English along with open ended guide questions was designed to elicit data from the participants in terms of their academic life experience and challenges to enable the researcher to identify the ACDs. As a content-analysis study, no ACD categories were pre-defined and therefore, the ACD categories emerged in accordance to the participants' accounts. The narrative interview as a qualitative research method in a form of unstructured, in-depth interview with specific features (Riesman, 1993; Flick, 1998) seems the most appropriate approach to elicit data from participants' past and present stories. This is supported by Shank & Abelson (1995) that argued "*New stories are interpreted in terms of old stories*" (p. 1). In the view of the fact that, narrations are rich in indexical statements, (a) because they refer to personal experience, and (b) because they tend to be detailed with a focus on events and actions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). In addition to that, narrative inquiry enables the narrator to tell the stories of their (educational) lived experiences and the habitual notions they have formed through experiencing specific institutional, organizational and/or discursive environments (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000). According to Chase (2005), "the narrative approach highlights narrators' 'identity work', 'as they construct selves within specific institutional, organizational, discursive and local cultural contexts'"(p. 26). Comparably, Barthes (1987) argues, there is no human experience that cannot be expressed in the form of a narrative. Therefore, it is believed

that narrative inquiry as an interpersonal interaction that takes place in a cultural space between interviewer and interviewee (Horsdal, 2012) could be the most optimum means of data collection for the present study as it can clearly reflect the international students' academic life experiences and barriers during their academic life.

### **7.1 Data collection procedure**

Narrative interviewing along with open-ended guide questions was administered to the 30 student participants. Another narrative interview was administered to the five lecturer participants. The entire interview was recorded by Sony ICD-SX25 digital voice recorder. Next their recordings were transcribed and coded (will be discussed in the next section). At the recording session, the participating students were firstly asked to complete this phrase: *"The academic challenges I faced at the UP since I came here were..."* (Appendix E) then they got asked some follow up questions to give their reflection with regards to the challenges reasons. Likewise, the participating lecturers' were asked to complete this phrase: *"The academic challenges faced by international students at the UP are..."* (Appendix E). At the end of their narration, pre-designed follow-up questions were followed. When the narration got started, was not interrupted until there was a clear coda, or when the interviewee paused and signaled the end of the story. During the narration, I abstained from any comment other than non-verbal signals of attentive listening and explicit encouragement to continue the narration. Moreover, in order to discover the factors underpinning the ACDs encountered by the student participants and lecturers' views, the guided questions were designed to ask as follow up questions.

The questioning phase did not start unless the interviewer sufficiently probed the end of the main narrative. The questioning phase was meant to elicit new and additional material beyond the self-generating schema of the story. At the end of the interview, as the tape recorder was switched off and participants were appreciated for their contribution. Both Lecturer and student participants were narrative-interviewed in March and April, 2016. While lecturers were recorded in their offices, students were recorded in their dormitory, the UP canteen or on-campus.

### **7.2 Data Analysis; Coding**

The qualitative data in the present study were coded and quantified based on Creswell's (2009) guidelines. He put forward his suggested steps as follow:

1. Conduct analysis based on the specific theoretical approach and method (eg. narrative, content, grounded theory, discourse, archival, semiotics and phonemic analysis techniques). This often involves coding or organizing related segments of data into categories.
2. Generate a description of the setting or people and identify themes from the coding. Search for theme connections.
3. Represent the data within a research report.



4. Interpret the larger meaning of the data.

Following this Creswell's suggested steps, the data were coded (figure. 1), categorized (figure. 2) and organized it in such a way that eases ongoing analysis. This process of analysis enables the researcher to make sense out of data recorded through participants' accounts.

Pieces of data were then carefully labeled and organized in such a way that eases ongoing analysis. As it was mentioned earlier, there was no pre-defined categories as this was a content-analysis study. While analyzing the accounts, the qualitative data were coded based on one (or more) of these criteria in the transcription: 1) something was repeated in several times, 2) something surprised the researcher, 3) the narrator explicitly stated that is important, 4) It reminds the researcher of a theory or a concept. After the data were coded, categories were created (table 3). Therefore, as it was discussed, in the process of analysis, the accounts were structured through emergent categorization, which means that excerpts with similar ideas were entered under the same headings, but new subcategories were formed whenever different or unprecedented ideas appeared in the texts.

The format and content of the accounts are illustrated by Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1:** A snapshot of the format and coded content of the accounts

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*EC: Language limitations* ( S 1,3,4,5,6,8,14,17,22,29 - T3, 5)

" ... For example, if an American student can finish a book in an hour, an international student who does not speak English at home should [consume] three hours to finish...[AC]\*, (S 23)

" [In TESCO] the package was like sugar and I bought it, when I came home, I saw it was something else...[NAC]\*, (S 3)

*EC: Curriculum/academic expectations* (S4,7,4,6 - T 1,3,4,5)

" The way they grade the assignment is very different from India, [it includes] many writings...[AC], (S 4)

"The work is hard and some students may experience their first low grades..." [AC], (T 5)

"I think one challenge that everyone faces is adjustment to university requirements and syllabus.....and understanding what reading requirements are..."[AC], (T2)

*EC: Self-organization*

These [International] students should know to complete schoolwork each day and turn it in on time, otherwise...[AC], ( T 3)

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\*AC=Academic Challenge \*NAC=Non-Academic Challenge  
T=Teachers ( Lecturers) S=Students EC: Emergent Category

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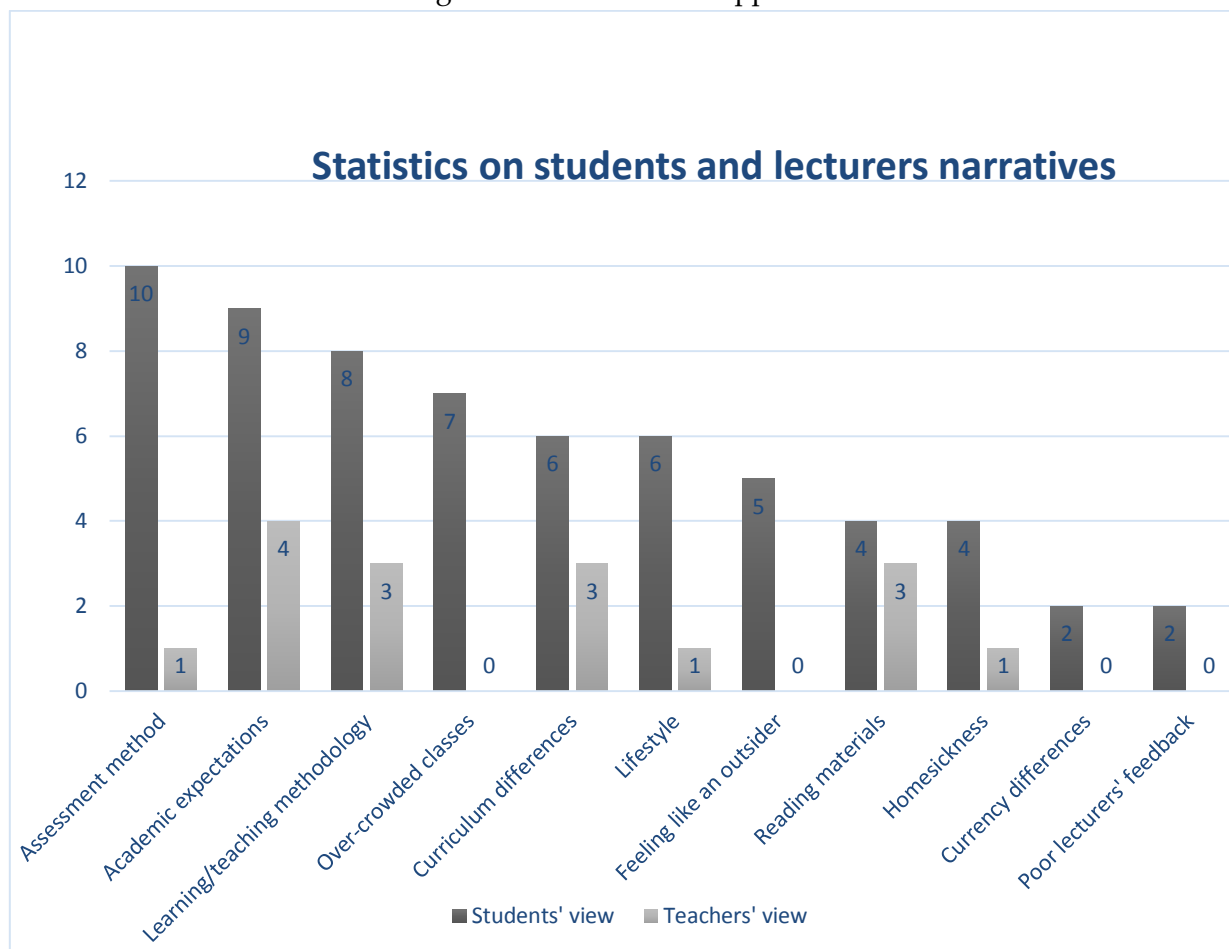
Table 3 offers a condensed view of the most frequent ACDs along with their frequency elicited from the participants' accounts. As the result of the content analysis of the accounts, 11 emergent ACD were identified and categorized along with the frequency of each category across the accounts as it is demonstrated in table 3:

**Table 3:** Academic cultural gaps identified in participants' narratives

Number	Academic cultural differences (ACD)	Students' code	Teacher's code	Frequency in students' narratives	Frequency in lecturers' narratives
1	Assessment method	1,3,4,5,6,8,14,17,22,29	3	10	1
2	Academic expectations	2,8,9,11,14,19,20,27,30	2,3,4,5	8	4
3	Learning/teaching methodology	5,8,9,11,13,14,19,22,25	1,2,5	9	3
4	Over-crowded classes	2,5,9,11,16,17,18, ,26	-	6	0
5	Curriculum differences	1,5,12,18,19,25,27	1,2,4	7	3
6	Lifestyle	6,8,9,16,17,21	5	6	1
7	Feeling like an outsider	3,5,7,8,21	-	5	0
8	Size of reading materials	7,8,11,21	-	4	3
9	Home and Family	12,27,29,30	4	4	1
10	Privacy of scores	25,29	-	2	0
11	Poor lecturer's feedback	4,18	-	2	0

Bar Chart 1, displays the ACDs faced by international students in the University of Pecs by percentage value. Darker columns show students' and lighter columns indicate the teachers' perspectives. As it can be clearly noticed, "assessment methods", "academic expectations" and "teaching and learning methodology" were identified as the most frequently narrated ACD by the international students in UP respectively, while lecturers hold slightly a different view: they see "Academic expectations" and "curriculum differences" and students' lack of familiarity's with new "reading materials" as the most influencing ACD factors which lead to an academic failure. Interestingly, Both lecturers and students unanimously mentioned "different teaching and learning methods as one of the top-three important factor.

**Chart 1:** Percentage values of the ACD appeared in the accounts



## 8. Results

As has been shown, there are a number of ACDs faced by international students while carrying on their academic life in the UP. After collecting data through narratives, 11 ACDs were identified and categorized (Table 3). The following is a brief summary of the main findings:

**A)** The most narrated ACDs by the students in the UP are:

- A) Unfair assessment method
- B) Learning/teaching methodology
- C) Academic expectations

**B)** The frequently narrated ACDs by the lecturers in the UP are:

- A) Academic expectations (by 4 lecturers).
- B) Learning/teaching methodology
- C) Size of reading materials

**C)** Both lecturers and students unanimously mentioned “different teaching and learning methods as one of the top-three important factor.

**D)** There are many areas in ACDs in students’ views that have never mentioned by the lecturers such as “overcrowd classes” and “poor lecturers’ feedback”.

E) ACD as a new term in the field is defined in this paper for the first time in accordance to the participants' views: An ACD is a barrier to education that happens when a different teaching/learning approach adopted by academics due to the lack of familiarity with the students' institutional background or the new academic setting and syllabus.

## 9. Discussion and further studies

International students need assistance and guidance to overcome their academic challenges which resulted from their ACD. Narrated by most of the lecturer participants, the academic expectation is not in line with the admission requirements in the UP. Students enter the university without requiring them to show an English language certificate in medical fields or taking their academic home institutional grades into consideration. The school may not live up to the expectations set by the brochures and admissions counselors. Rarely does an admissions pamphlet tell all about the ins and outs, and the limits and shortcomings of a place. Some introductory course can assist help the problem if it raises prospective students' awareness of how academic life would be in the UP. Moreover, lecturers need to clarify their assessment method for their students when they wonder how 80 exam sheets can be scored over a night in order to prevent students from making wrong assumptions. Additionally, it might be fruitful if lecturers provide students with appropriate feedback in terms of their evaluation criteria and the philosophy behind that to convince their students that these are the students who would benefit the most from such assessment. Last but not least, although the focus of this study was not to specifically address students' privacy in terms of the way their scores get published by their lecturers, it has been seen that some lecturers share students' scores so that it is visible to everyone in their group. This is against the students' right of privacy and is regarded as a state in which one's score is observed and therefore disturbed by other classmates. The present study aimed at raising the awareness and identifying ACD faced by international students at the UP.

Further investigation is needed to design a plan to minimize academic barriers stemmed from ACD at the UP. As a suggested further study, ACD needs to be addressed in the context of UP aimed at managing ACD in line with the available great body of literature in the field. The data yielded by Garmon's study provides convincing evidence that *"the features that led to teachers' success with culturally diverse students are disposition towards openness, appreciation of differences and eagerness to engage in new experiences"* (Cited in Rehm, 2008, p.47). Moreover, the feasibility and the practicality of *"cross-cultural training"* for the UP lectures may be the focal point of the subsequent studies. I hope this study motivates other researchers to use a narrative based approach and investigate more in the *"ACD"* which was termed and defined for the first time here.

## 10. Limitation of the study

Due to the nature of a narrative based research, some unavoidable limitations emerged: Firstly, the uncontrollable expectations of the informants, which raise doubts about the strong claim of non-directivity of the narrative interviewing. Secondly, the interviewer presented himself as if he knew nothing about the topic under study. Informants might perceive this attitude as a trick, and this perception will interfere with their cooperation.

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