

CULTURE AND FOOD HABITS:  
ISSUES SURROUNDING FOOD WITH  
NEW INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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By

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to describe the issues, adjustments and factors surrounding the international student population at the University of Saskatchewan. The study included new graduate and undergraduate international students from a variety of cultural backgrounds upon entering the University of Saskatchewan to begin their studies September 1998. Three research questions guided the research study: (1) what issues surrounding food do international students cope with upon immigrating to Canada to study at the University of Saskatchewan, (2) what adjustments do international students anticipate having to make or what adjustments have they made regarding their food behaviors since arriving in Canada, and (3) what factors do international students feel have or will have an influence on their food habits and food behaviors.

The study used both quantitative and qualitative methodology. Two phases of data collection and analysis were conducted: closed ended questionnaires mailed out to graduate and undergraduate international students in year one registration (phase 1), and personal one-to-one interviews between the researcher and international student (phase 2) selected by quota sampling. The questionnaire obtained information on the food practices since coming to Canada and changes in food consumption (food frequency) from the home country to Canada. The purpose of the questionnaire was to obtain baseline data in order to help develop questions for the in-depth interviews. By quantitative analysis, the main findings of

the questionnaire included missing foods from the home country, finding different foods available in the grocery store, finding more expensive foods in Canada, having never or hardly ever cooked before coming to Canada, and finding difficulty shopping or knowing how to select foods.

Fifty personal one-to-one interviews were used to further explore the main food issues and food habits from the questionnaire. The personal interviews were qualitatively analyzed to find themes and patterns which emerged across cultural backgrounds and within cultures. The main issues included food shopping (i.e., differences in shopping system between the home country and Canada, canned/ frozen/ convenience foods, unfamiliar and new foods, and availability of traditional foods), cooking, and changes in eating habits. Methods for adjusting to these issues included food substitution and maintaining traditional tastes of foods. The factors which influenced food habits included economics, gender roles, friends and/or family, and previous experiences prior to coming to Canada (i.e., attending university, eating fast food, and living abroad or away from home). Changes in eating habits due to the length of time in the new country was assessed by interviewing ten international students from a variety of cultural backgrounds living in Canada for more than one year.

Verification of the methods was ensured by using the techniques of member checking, prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, reflexive journal, thick description, and audit trails. These techniques established the qualitative criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability

and confirmability of the findings which parallel the quantitative criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity, respectively. This study was significant because it provided information for nutrition educators and health professionals to develop appropriate nutrition education programming which takes into account cultural background. The information gathered from this study may be useful in developing and providing nutrition education to international students at the University of Saskatchewan.

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## **Dedication**

My gratitude goes to my parents, my sister and my brother. I would like to thank my mom and dad for always supporting my academic pursuits, and for always encouraging me to achieve my goals. Thanks to my sister and brother who are always morally supportive, and are there for me whenever I need them.

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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

### **1.1 Introduction**

Cultural heritage determines and identifies people's values, beliefs, behavior and lifestyle. Populations that have immigrated to Canada have brought with them their own cultural heritage. Food is one aspect of cultural heritage that is often influenced by family or cultural groups. Health professionals who are aware of the cultural background of their clients can provide more effective nutrition education for behavior change. As well, understanding a cultural group's food-related issues enriches the knowledge of health professionals and enhances the development of nutrition and health programs designed to meet the needs of the population.

University students are a population group with diverse food behaviors. Within this population group, there are international university students who have come abroad to study at Canadian universities. Additional concerns associated with international students include the process of coping and adjusting to living in a new country. International students may be faced with differences and changes between the home country and the new country in areas such as the psychological and social process, lifestyle norms and behaviors, and the loss of cultural heritage and self-identity.

### **1.2 Problem Statement**

Movement from one type of culture into another has an impact on one's identity and

sense of belonging. Many young people leave home to go to school in distant cities or countries. These international students are trying to adjust to a new environment in a foreign country (Mirsky & Kaushinsky, 1989). Initially, international students may search for their cultural identity and heritage through others who speak their native language or eat the foods of their country of origin. Over time their behavior may become more integrated to the foreign country and they may start to cope with the realities of a new country in terms of the language, activities, and food in the new environment. However, little is known about how international students cope and adjust to the food habits and food issues they face in a new country. Such information would be useful in developing nutrition education programs for international university students.

### 1.3 Background to the Problem

Culture includes the behaviors, habits, beliefs, values, attitudes, and customs that are learned (Barer-Stein & Draper, 1988; Kittler & Sucher, 1995; Newman, 1985; Rux, 1982). Cultural groups have different food habits and food behaviors regarding what and how foods should be selected, obtained, prepared, served and eaten (Axelson, 1986; Bryant, Courtney, Markesbery, & DeWalt, 1985; Hertzler & Owen, 1984). Individuals who immigrate to a new country often incorporate foods and food habits from the new country (Crane & Green, 1980; Dewey, Strode, & Fitch, 1984; Gupta, 1975; Karim, Bloch, Falciglia, & Murthy, 1986; Pan, Dixon, Himburg, & Huffman, 1999; Pasquali, 1985; Romero-Gwynn et al., 1993; Story &

Harris, 1988; Yang & Fox, 1979). However, there is some retention of traditional foods as complete abandonment of traditional food habits does not occur.

When in a different cultural setting, cultural adaptation requires integrating and learning behaviors and norms of the new country in order to obtain some security in the new environment. International students are faced with adjusting and using their skills in a foreign environment when they come to study in a new country. They are having to cope with the realities of a new country (Mirsky & Kaushinsky, 1989). At the University of Saskatchewan in the 1998/ 99 school year, of undergraduate full time students, 2.2% were international students (student visa) and 1.8% were landed immigrants, and of the full time graduate student population, 22.6% were international students (student visa) and 8.6% were landed immigrants (University of Saskatchewan Statistics, 1999).

The diverse backgrounds of students attending Canadian universities suggests the need for nutrition educators and health professionals to understand the variety of food habits and cultural backgrounds in order to provide effective nutrition education programs to international university students (Welch, Nidiffer, Zager, & Lyerla, 1992). Nutrition educators and health professionals should focus on culture, and the context of food and eating habits (Bryant et al., 1985; Hertzler & Owen, 1984) in order to develop appropriate nutrition education programs for cultural groups.



#### 1.4 Purpose

The purpose of this study was to describe the issues and factors surrounding food with new international students at the University of Saskatchewan, and the adjustments used to cope with food issues since arriving in Canada.

#### 1.5 Research Questions

- (1) What issues surrounding food do international students cope with upon immigrating to Canada to study at the University of Saskatchewan?
- (2) What adjustments do international students anticipate having to make or what adjustments have they made regarding their food behaviors since arriving in Canada?
- (3) What factors do international students feel have or will have an influence on their food habits and food behaviors?

#### 1.6 Assumptions

The following were assumptions made for this research study:

- both the international graduate and undergraduate student population groups at the University of Saskatchewan had food issues and recognized their food-related issues
- the international students who participated in the research had knowledge of their food traditions and followed the food traditions in their culture
- the food issues of new international students entering the University of Saskatchewan may be more prominent than those who have been in Canada for a number of years

## 1.7 Scope

The study included new international graduate and undergraduate university students at the University of Saskatchewan. International students upon entering their studies in September 1998 were recruited. International students in upper years were not targeted under the assumption their food-related issues would be different. International students who entered the University of Saskatchewan to begin their studies in January 1999 or later date were not approached due to time constraints for data collection and analysis. Landed immigrant students were also not included due to the lack of available information on them, and difficulty in distinguishing between those who entered University of Saskatchewan as landed immigrants and those who became landed immigrants as a result of living in Canada for a number of years.

## 1.8 Significance of the Study

Updated and new information will help nutrition educators and health professionals recognize the impact that cultural factors have on food behaviors. Investigating the food-related issues that international students cope with when immigrating to another country can help with the design of meaningful nutrition education programs that takes into account cultural backgrounds. These programs may be more effective in dealing with the food-related issues and promoting healthy nutrition habits to international university students. Researching international students from a variety of cultural groups instead of focusing on a particular

cultural group can help nutrition educators provide education to the population of international students at the University of Saskatchewan. Therefore, both international students at the University of Saskatchewan and nutrition educators would benefit from the information gained from this research.

As well, international students who participated could benefit. Participants expressed opinions and voiced concerns. Participants may have been empowered because they were involved and encouraged to speak out. Participants may have gained awareness of nutrition. This research may have encouraged them to expand their opportunities and decision making towards food. In addition, the researcher learned from this research study by gaining knowledge and awareness of different cultural groups.

#### 1.9 Definition of Terms

**Culture** - "sum total of all aspects of the life patterns of daily life that are learned by an individual within a culture, that determinedly affects that person's behavior, offers a sense of order, security and identity, and yet paradoxically is in a state of continuous change"

(Barer-Stein & Draper, 1988, p.38).

**Ethnic** - "a common cultural tradition and a sense of identity as a traditionally distinct subgroup within a larger society; and possibly possession of their own language, religion, and distinctive customs" (Anderson & Frideres, 1981, p.37).

**Cultural Adaptation** - "sudden awareness of being within a differing cultural setting that

requires the individual to quickly learn those daily patterns (or accommodate to them in some acceptable way) that will grant one security in the new environment" (Barer-Stein & Draper, 1988, p.40).

**Acculturation** - "a total adaptive and coping process affecting not only the cultural patterning and value system but also the psychological structure and psychophysiological functions of individuals and families, as adaptations are made to changed conditions created by the impact of people and their environment upon each other" (Hertz, 1988, p.161); the extent that values and norms of an individual or a cultural group correspond to those of another society (Yinger, 1985).

**Food Behavior** - "observable expressions most often identified as actual food items but also evident in preparation, serving, consumption, and post-consumption practices; also the equipment, facilities, recipes, and roles observable in food handling and eating practices" (Hertzler, Wenkam, & Standal, 1982, p.421).

**Food Habits** - "studying a culture's foodways is to examine the food-related behavior (commonly called food habits) of individuals within a society because their behaviors are reflections of culture" (Axelson, 1986, p.346).

**International Students** (students on student authorization, student visa) - students issued a document by an immigration officer "whereby the person to whom it is issued is authorized (a) to attend a university or college authorized by statute or charter to confer degrees, or (b) to

take an academic, professional or vocational training course at a university, college or other institution not described in paragraph" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1997, p.17).

**Landed Immigrant** (permanent resident) - "person who (a) has been granted landing, (b) has not become a Canadian citizen" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1993, p.4).

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

### 2.1 Introduction

Food, dance, customs, and music are part of cultural identity and cultural heritage. Thus, culture plays an important role in food habits and food behaviors. Numerous factors influence food habits of cultural groups. Researchers have examined the acculturation of food habits of various cultural groups immigrating to a new country.

### 2.2 Culture

Culture is composed of beliefs, behaviors, habits, attitudes, values, and customs that are learned (Barer-Stein & Draper, 1988; Bryant et al., 1985; Kittler & Sucher, 1995; Newman, 1985; Rux, 1982; Spector, 1991). There are many different cultural heritages and people often try to maintain their cultural identity. Individuals consider their culture or ethnic identity to be an important part of their self or their self-identity (Rosenthal & Hrynevich, 1985) as identified through language, cultural background, religion, family and traditional characteristics.

The concept of culture is complex because it is possible for an individual to be part of several different cultural groups simultaneously. Cultural identity can come from family, heritage, ethnicity, environment, societal groups, corporations, institutions, professions, occupations, socioeconomic status, age groups and gender groups (Barer-Stein & Draper, 1988). Each of these different subgroups can add to an individual's cultural identity.

Culture can affect an individual's health and well being. Like the areas of income, education and employment, culture is a determinant of health (Frank, 1995) that can influence effective health promotion and health education strategies. The sociocultural variables of an individual's behavior include sociodemographic and psychosocial categories (Axelson, 1986; Newman, 1985). The sociodemographic variables may be known as the external variables such as income, education, ethnicity, gender, age, household size, and living conditions. The psychosocial variables are known to include internal variables of an individual such as knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes.

Food traditions and habits are influenced by culture (Axelson, 1986; Bryant et al., 1985; Kittler & Sucher, 1995). Many food habits and behaviors are learned and are a significant aspect of the culture. Different cultures may have different methods of food preparation, food consumption, food selection, food preferences, and food processing. The food habits and food practices of obtaining, preparing, and consuming of food reflects the factors of culture, acculturation, and the interaction among individuals and their culture and society (Axelson, 1986; Bryant et al., 1985; Hertzler & Owen, 1984; Newman, 1985).

### 2.2.1 Cultural Adjustment

Migration has been defined as persons or groups moving over a significant distance (Hertz, 1993). Migration involves changes in the environment which requires adjustments to be made by the immigrant. The process of migration may involve the loss of identity and may

include adjustment and growth. Hertz (1988) explains the three stages of positive adjustment as pre-immigration, the coping stage of immigration, and the settlement stage.

Pre-immigration is when the immigrant is rationalizing making the move and is preparing for the move. The coping stage of immigration involves the impact level (i.e., feelings of elation and relief once the immigrant arrives to the new environment), followed by the rebound level (i.e., feelings of disappointment after experiencing the reality of the new environment), and the coping level (i.e., feelings of security by learning and becoming familiar with aspects of the new environment). The immigrant then reaches the settlement stage where there is readiness to accept the new environment and surroundings (i.e., feelings of belonging).

Cultural adjustments occur when people of a cultural group move into a new society where the norms and behaviors are different (Kittler & Sucher, 1995). This adjustment involves the process of acculturation which can be defined as "a total adaptive and coping process affecting not only the cultural patterning and value system but the psychological structure and psychophysiological functions of individuals and families, as adaptations are made to changed conditions created by the impact of people and their environment upon each other" (Hertz, 1988, p.161). Therefore, acculturation is a process of integrating and adapting the habits, attitudes, behaviors, norms and values of the new country (Ginsberg & Gioielli, 1979; Kittler & Sucher, 1995; Spector, 1991; Yinger, 1985) in areas such as the language, friends, religion, cultural interests, and food habits.



Culture shock can be attributed to the process of acculturation and is defined as "disorientation felt by a person subjected to an unfamiliar way of life" (Oxford Dictionary, 1996). That is, when an immigrant's values and behaviors greatly differ from the new country, then adjustment to the new society can be a culture shock. However, there are different levels of adaptation into the new culture (Barer-Stein & Draper, 1988). People may adapt in their clothing, routines, and jargon but may maintain their ethnic language and foods at home. Specific to dietary habits, acculturation can be assessed through changes in the types and amounts of foods consumed and selected, food preparation methods, and meal patterns.

#### 2.2.2 International University Students and Adjustment

The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE) is a national organization focused on international students. The Canadian Bureau for International Education prepared a National Report on International Students in Canada 1996/97. The data in the report are from Statistics Canada and Citizenship and Immigration Canada. The university data were based on student enrolment as of December 1 each year. The data for community colleges, cegeps, institutes of technology, trade schools and elementary/ secondary schools were based on the number of valid student authorizations as of December 1 each year (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 1997). The most recent and current National Report on International Students in Canada 1996/97 reports "taking all levels together, international student enrolment in Canada increased by 38% in 1989-90 (72,000) to 1996/97 (100,000)"

(Canadian Bureau for International Education, 1997, p.4). These figures included the education levels of elementary/ secondary, college/trade, and university (undergraduate and graduate). In 1996/97, at the university level there were 22,782 undergraduate international students and 12,870 graduate international students in Canada (Canadian Bureau for International Education, 1997).

International students may find themselves trying to adjust to a new environment and a foreign country (Mirsky & Kaushinsky, 1989). Being in a foreign environment and culture, international students may lack the sources of security and well-being (Mirsky & Kaushinsky, 1989). They are in transition because they are away from their home country and many are on their own. In this transition and migration, international students may have feelings of loneliness, separation, isolation and homesickness (Akande, 1994; Mirsky & Kaushinsky, 1988, 1989; Sandhu, 1994). Mirsky and Kaushinsky (1988) found that international students often miss what they leave in their home country such as their homeland, friends, family, landscape, food, culture, and language.

Mirsky and Kaushinsky (1989) studied this transition process (i.e., absorption process) based on experiences with immigrant students who were in Israel. These students had feelings of excitement and curiosity in the first weeks of immigration because everything was new. After the initial elation had decreased, students became aware of their reality and then tried to orient themselves and use their skills in the new environment. These students realized their

new environment was unfamiliar and feelings of loss and separation may occur. These international students often, (1) found company from other international students, and (2) formed groups with individuals from their home country and with students who spoke their language and ate foods from their home country. Over time international students tend to make other friends and take part in campus and cultural activities (Mirsky & Kaushinsky, 1989). Most international students were able to realistically integrate their foreign country and their home country; their cultural identity included new and old aspects of themselves (Mirsky & Kaushinsky, 1988).

Alexander and Shaw (1991) identified that culture, concerns and coping were important to international students. Within the area of culture, their sub-categories included environment, food, lifestyle, and personal relationships. That is, the international student brought specific aspects of their culture to the new country but found that their knowledge may not be useful in the new country. The concerns of the international student were attributed to the culture shock (i.e., uprooting) which occurred because of the movement to the new country. There were feelings of disorientation and unfamiliarity. Some concerns included social isolation, getting settled and language. Coping efforts (i.e., internal strategies) were used to deal with the concerns identified.

Behavior may become more modified or integrated to the norms and expectations of the new country. Based on a cultural adjustment scale, Kagan and Cohen (1990) report that

international students who scored high on cultural resistance were often married, non-English speaking at home and without close friends who were from the new country, whereas international students who scored high on cultural shift (i.e., adjustment) tended to be single, English-speaking at home, and having close friends who were from the new country.

Similarly, other studies have found that interaction with students from the new country was an important factor which influenced international students' adjustment (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Surdam & Collins, 1984; Zimmermann, 1995). Surdam and Collins (1984) found that international students who interacted and spent leisure time with Americans adapted better in the new country than students who spent more time with others from their home country. As well, these researchers had considered that family and personal background, knowledge about the new country before arriving, previous experience travelling, and perceived adequacy of the English language were characteristics particular to each international student. That is, each characteristic is independent and may influence or have a relationship on the adaptation of international students. International students often have different backgrounds and characteristics which may impact their adjustment in the new country (Par, Bradley & Bingi, 1992).

Heikinheimo and Shute (1986) examined the adaptation of international students to academics and their interaction in the new culture, specifically with Canadian students from the new country. As identified by participants, adaptation included the main areas of language

skills, academics, cultural differences, and social interaction with Canadians. Students who used and improved their English had less social and academic adjustment problems, and found it easier to adjust and learn the culture.

Adaptation is complex and for international students adaptation is often influenced by academic, social, financial, language, and cultural issues (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986).

Language differences can be a barrier to the adjustment of international students in their new country (Deressa & Beavers, 1988; Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Mirsky, 1991; Surdam & Collins, 1984). Although there may be some basic understanding of verbal and written English, studies have taken into consideration the issue of language when constructing questionnaires (Jamieson & Stewin, 1987; Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994; Miller & Harwell, 1983; Schram & Lauver, 1988).

Conducting needs assessment and understanding needs are important in order to assess health needs and concerns, and areas of improvement for program planning and implementation. By interviewing international students, their families and health care providers, Ogbudimkpa, Creswell, Lambert, and Kingston (1988) found international students did not know about or use the available health services. Recommendations included developing health information and education programs that address the health needs of international students, developing orientation and education sessions to make educators more aware of cultural differences, coordinating health promotion activities and health advocates,