



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

# Intercultural Communication: Social and Academic Integration of International Doctoral Students in Sweden.

A study on cultural differences experiences of Iranian PhD students at Chalmers  
University of Technology, Göteborg.

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## **Abstract:**

In Sweden, international doctoral students comprised 40 percent of new doctoral students in 2012. Iranian PhD students are the second big majority of international doctoral students in Sweden (UKÄ, 2013). In this thesis the culture related experiences of Iranian doctoral students in Sweden are studied in a communicative perspective. The different cultural dimensions of Persian and Swedish culture are discussed. The social and academic integration of Iranian doctoral students and their probable obstacles are studied, as well as their manner of confrontation and coping with the adjustment process in a new environment. The culture shock period, its different stages, and its impacts on the integration of the subjects are analyzed.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods are employed. As the main data of this study are the narratives and micro-experiences of doctoral students, qualitative method is the dominant method used. 11 Iranian doctoral students were interviewed in semi-structured face to face interviews. Moreover, the quantitative data were gathered through questioners which were designed and distributed among 30 Iranian doctoral students. Data are categorized according to the different cultural dimensions of Persian and Swedish culture, culture shock period, integration and adjustment requirements, and significant explanations of the interviewees. Results are presented, summarized, and then discussed in relation to theoretical terms. This study reveals that socio-cultural knowledge, and being aware of intercultural communication patterns contributes to promote the social and academic integration of international doctoral students. Recommendations for improving the adjustment and integration of international students are presented at the end.

Key word: intercultural communication, social and academic integration, cultural differences, culture shock, Iranian PhD students.

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## Introduction:

Globalization has led to much immigration all over the world (Saskaia, 2007). United Nations named our century “an era of greatest human displacement in the history” due to the major immigrations and emigrations in the world. Likewise, many students continue their studies at a university abroad (Healey, 2008). In recent years, non-English speaking countries including Sweden accept many international students, and based on the different national educational systems, different languages and cultures; European countries are distinguished subjects for studying the influences of cultural diversity on internationals (House et al, 2004). Many international students choose Sweden to continue their studies, and many of these students may further choose to work and settle down in Sweden<sup>1</sup>. A significant feature of postgraduate education in Sweden is international recruitment, and the number of foreign doctoral students has progressively increased during the last decade. In comparison with the whole number of new doctoral students, foreign doctoral students comprised 40 percent of new doctoral students in 2012. While In 2003, 20 percent of new doctoral students were foreign doctoral students. (UKÄ, 2013)

The total number of PhD students at Swedish universities was about 18 900 in the fall 2012. There were approximately 9200 women and 9 800 men. The average age for new PhD students in 2012 was 29 for men and 30 for women. More than 3700 graduate students started PhD studies in 2012, and this figure is 200 more than 2011. (UKÄ, 2012) KTH Royal Institute of Technology has the biggest number of newly employed foreign PhD students in 2012, which is about 280 new PhD students. Furthermore, more than 100 foreign, new PhD students started their education at Chalmers University of Technology in 2012. (Ibid, 2013) Chalmers University of Technology comprised 1,162 PhD students at 2013. This figure was 1,172 PhD students in 2012. (SCB, 2013)

Iranian doctoral students are the second big majority of international PhD students at Sweden. China<sup>2</sup> has the biggest population of PhD students at Swedish universities, followed by Iran and then India. As illustrated in the table 1, in 2012, totally 190 new Iranian PhD students were accepted for doctoral studies at Swedish universities. This figure is bigger than the previous years and shows an increase in the number of Iranian PhD student accepted yearly at Swedish universities. (UKÄ, 2013)

**Table 1 New Iranian doctoral students enrolled in postgraduate education 2003-2012 in Sweden**

year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
totall	26	32	51	44	44	76	115	108	159	190
Female	...	6	18	17	12	22	36	40	57	75
Male	22	26	33	27	32	54	79	68	102	115

<sup>1</sup> In 2012-2013, there were 34000 incoming students studying at Swedish colleges or universities. Among these students, 21600 were studying for the first time, i.e. they were new in Swedish higher education system. (UKÄ, 2013,12,12)

<sup>2</sup> 224 Chinese and 99 Indian PhD students were accepted for PhD studies at 2012. The total number of newly enrolled PhD students at Swedish universities at 2012, is 1472. (SCB, 2012)

Among the international students, Iranians are a majority group that chooses Sweden as a destination to continue studies abroad, and even to work and establish future life. Iranians desire higher education, and it is highly valued in Persian culture (Naghdi, 2010). In Sweden, Iranian PhD students are the second big majority of foreign-born doctoral students at Swedish universities. 28% of newly enrolled PhD students in 2012 were Iranian students (SCB, 2012). According to Hofstede (1986) Iran and Sweden have different cultural features that categorize these two countries in different classes. When Iranian PhD students, as new employees of the Swedish universities, enter Sweden to start life, study and work in a totally new environment they undergo culture shock, and this will impact on their social and academic integration and performance. According to Trice and Beyer (1993) Culture comes from human's endeavor to manage uncertainties and to establish degrees of order in the social life. (Trice and Beyer, 1993, p. 1) Therefore, entering to a new society and culture imposes different degrees of uncertainty among different people. When Iranian PhD students want to start their doctoral education in Sweden, they are confronted with some cultural related challenges; first they are coming from a Middle East country in Asia, with a different culture, society, religion, language, and perspectives toward life, to a Scandinavian country with its different features and characteristics. Second: they are entering from a different academic/work environment to a totally new work and study environment with Swedish patterns, rules, orders, and norms. Hofstede et al (2002) believe that culture shock is not just occurred when entering a new country; it might also happen when one person enters a new working environment such as a new organization, university, or town. They define culture shock as the "process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar culture." It is further described as a sudden entering to a non-explicit level of uncertainty, when one person does not know what he/she should do, or what to expect from others. This might happen, in situations when people newly entered to societies, have to adjust themselves to unfamiliar patterns and behaviors. (Hofstede et al, 2002:22)

According to Hofstede (2001) different countries might have different approaches to learning and education based on their culture and values. A country like Germany has more traditional ways of teaching, while Netherland is more student-centered. Therefore, according to Zepke & Leach (2005) international students may undergo culture shock, when confronting with the different educational organization and attitudes of the host university. Tinto (1975) believes that due to the different cultural, social, and educational backgrounds of international students, their educational assimilation is affected by individual and social characteristics.

Interaction among international students and the natives of the host country is one of the important factors in establishing a more convenient adjustment, the more they interact properly, the easier their settlement will be (Church, 1982). According to Allwood (1999) communication among people with different cultures may lead to misunderstandings. This is due to different cultural patterns, and the fact that people of different cultural background expect certain behavioral patterns. He adds that for better understanding of the similarities and differences between cultures, it is necessary to study and analyze the cultural values and communication patterns of different cultures. Allwood (1999) believes that the first step of a

proper intercultural communication is to learn about one's own culture, values and behavioral patterns as well as others cultural norms, attitudes and patterns. Favell, et al. (2006) believes that more micro-level phenomenological research and study on different aspects of everyday realities related to "global mobility" especially with focuses on highly skilled migrants is essential. He adds that realizing and distinguishing personal experiences of immigrants can contribute to creation of new perspectives on handling cultural integration, and transformation. Therefore in this research, Swedish and Persian culture, and communication attitudes are studied and compared. Furthermore intercultural experiences, challenges, and obstacles of Iranian PhD students as well as their social and academic assimilation and adjustment, are analyzed and discussed. According to Ward, et al. (2001) psychological and physical welfare of international students and their academic performance is affected by the adjustment difficulties. Rienties, et al. (2013) believe that Academic performance of international students is connected to their academic integration and adjustment. If students are motivated enough, and have set their educational patterns according to the host organization, they might function properly and be more successful. (Rienties et al, 2013).

## **Purpose and Overview of thesis**

The purpose of this thesis is to distinguish the culture related experiences of Iranian PhD students at Chalmers University of technology. This study intends to explore and identify the culture shock process and its effects on the social and educational integration of Iranian PhD students. By conducting this study, the major cultural differences that Iranian PhD students experience in the social and academic study-work environment in Sweden is distinguished, as well as the manner of their confrontation and solutions to cope with the difficulties of adjustment, integration, and cultural differences.

Structure of the thesis:

- Introduction
- Purpose & Overview of the thesis
- Research Questions
- Methodology
- Literature Review
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion
- Recommendations/suggestions



In this thesis, after introducing the topic, Methods of data collection are presented. Then necessary terms are reviewed in the Literature Review section. Later, in results section, quantitative data is illustrated through charts and a summary of its results are presented. Literature and data driven themes are categorized and likewise, qualitative data is illustrated via abstracts of interviews with Iranian PhD students. The summary of qualitative results from interviews is also presented. A theoretical section follows the previous part and discusses the findings in relation to theories and literature. Consequently, in conclusion part, short review of the main issues and answers in relation to the research question is presented. Finally in recommendation section, suggestions are presented to the university administration; recommendations for facilitating international PhD students adjustment and improving their social and academic integration.

### **Research Questions:**

This study intends to figure out:

- In terms of intercultural communication, what cultural differences Iranian PhD students experience at Sweden?
- How is their social and academic integration and adaptation?

To answer these questions, the following methodology is employed.

### **Methodology:**

Intercultural experiences of students, their integration into a new academic and social environment, and culture shock can be studied from psychological, sociological, anthropological, and communicational perspectives.

According to Creswell (2007) the research questions specifies the methodology of a research. Hennik et al. (2011) believes that we employ “How questions” to recognize and explain behaviors and beliefs and specify the context in which experiences of subjects take place. As long as this study requires deep information of the cultural differences, and culture shock process in Iranian PhD students, in-depth interviews are conducted. Furthermore, with employing semi-structured interviews, the researcher is able to ask additional questions beyond the previously designed interview guide, in order to grasp supplementary interesting data which were not predicted when designing the interview questions. (Oktay, 2012) I chose qualitative research method primary, to give the informants freedom to describe their cultural experiences freely and talk about what they believe is more important for them.

Kumar (2005) believes that qualitative and quantitative studies are different, based on their purpose. Despite the fact that some scholars insist on the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods, Olson (2004) suggests combination of both methods. This concept in methodological pluralism identifies a pluralism of methods which enables researches to employ different methods and techniques in order to understand and cover different aspects of one social phenomenon.

In this study both qualitative and quantitative methods are used, therefore there are mainly two sources of data for this study; (1) data which are gathered through interviews, (2) data which are gathered through questionnaires. However, data are mainly analyzed from qualitative perspective. Data and analysis from quantitative perspective is also provided.

Wertz (2011) believes that qualitative perspectives and attitudes toward human activities and psychological identity have started to be part of anthropologies since its institutionalization in 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Creswell (2009) applying qualitative method is to distinguish and recognize how people perceive social problems.

The qualitative data is gathered through semi-structured interviews. The preliminary design of the interview questions was tested and after that some questions were added, deleted, or reformulated. The questions were open-ended and allowed the interviewees to freely talk about their experiences and perspectives.

Between April 4<sup>th</sup> to April 25<sup>th</sup> 2014, 11 in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted and Narratives of Iranian PhD students were audio-recorded. Each interview took about 35 minutes. According to Brettell (2003) narratives assist the sociologist recognize the ways people perceive world by linking their experiences of success and failure and illustrating a conclusion to them.

11 participants were interviewed openly and face-to-face (one-on-one). According to Pratt, M.G. (2009), there is no magic number that determines how many participants should be interviewed. What matter is the quality of interviews; they should cover all the aspects from different points of views. Interviewees are asked to explain about basically regarding their different experiences of culture shock, their hardest obstacles for academic and social assimilation, and their usual way of coping with cultural differences. The whole interview is transcribed from Persian language to English, and then coded and categorized. Personal information of the participants was removed.

Furthermore, 30 participants (Iranian PhD students) filled out the questionnaires<sup>3</sup>. The data gathered through questionnaires is illustrated through graphs and diagrams. Quantitative data is collected through questionnaires; questionnaires are designed based on the related literature and former discussions with Iranian doctors who got their PhD at Chalmers University of technology. The questioners provided the respondents the opportunity to choose more than one option, and also enabled them to write their own responses in “other” section. Each Questionnaire contains 10 questions. Several probable answers are available for the students to choose. However they can write their own answers in the “other” section”. Questions seek the psychological, social, communicational, cultural, educational and other aspects of students’ life abroad. Some questions seek information including: Their gender, the years of being abroad, their language proficiency and probable cultural/educational/social obstacles, their way of coping with them, impacts of educational system differences, and other criteria.

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<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire is in appendix, at the end of this thesis, p:72.

**Ethical Issues:**

The participants were informed about the goal and procedure of this project. All of them enthusiastically participated in the interviews and were interested to talk about their intercultural experiences and their hardships/joys. They gave consent for their voice to be audio-recorded. Furthermore, all the private and personal information of the participants is omitted.

## Literature Review:

In this part, theories and terms employed in the thesis are presented. The most important terms namely culture and its dimensions are reviewed first, then Persian and Swedish culture are elaborated. Next, intercultural communication, culture shock and its stages are presented. And finally, social/academic adjustment and integration, and language issues are discussed.

### Culture:

According to Hall: “Culture is communication and communication is culture” (Hall, 1959, p. 217). Li and Karakowsky (2001) believe that culture is the collective deposit of values, norms, patterns, roles, relations, behaviors, beliefs, knowledge, perspectives, experiences, attitudes, religion as well as material objects of people, which are learnt and acquired throughout generations. Hofstede (1984) believes that the psychological and mental programming of mind which is distinct in different categories of people is named “culture”. According to Lederach (1995) culture is a scheme of shared knowledge designed by people for being able to interoperate, perceive, express and respond to social realities in their surrounding environment accordingly. Damen (1987) defines culture as the humans’ initial adaptive mechanism, and asserts that culture is the received and shared patterns and styles of living that covers different aspects of social interaction. Allwood (1985) believes that culture is the common characteristics and patterns of a set of people which should be learned, since it is not gifted by nature. He further mentions that culture includes different features and properties that contribute to organizing one’s life.

### Classification of Cultures:

Some professionals have classified the cultures by their characteristics, norms, values and core cultural issues. The most well-known classification is presented by Hofstede (1997).

Hofstede (1986) presents five criteria for cultural differences, these are: *power-distance*, *individualism–collectivism*, *masculinity–femininity*, *uncertainty avoidance*, and *long-term–short-term orientation*.

**Power-distance** stands for the amount of inequality in the distribution of power among members of an institute. It illustrates the extent which less powerful people accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.

**Individualism versus collectivism** identifies the tendency of people to be in groups or not; it means to what extent people look after themselves in contrast for their care and belonging to cohesive groups. In individualistic societies people are self-oriented and responsible for themselves and their immediate families, while in collectivistic societies people are born in families with strong connectedness to others. People are linked, protected and supported strongly by family, relatives, friends and whom they are connected with.

**Masculinity-femininity:** In feminist cultures, roles of men and women overlap, while in masculine societies roles are distinguished. In masculine cultures males are expected to be tough, strong and material oriented, and females are expected to be tender and life quality oriented. Whereas in individualistic societies expectations from both genders are the same, and they all are expected to be tender and caring about the quality of life. Hofstede (2010)

believes that in feminist countries like Norse Europe, to be an average student is the Standard, and being excellent is something related to one-self. (Hofstede & Minkov, 2010) (Tempelaar et al, 2012).

**Uncertainty avoidance:** describe how much people of a culture are tolerant to ambiguity and how much they prefer patterns and clearance that is usually established throughout rules, law and other forms of social control.

People with cultures that show great desire to escape ambiguity consider changes inappropriate and may resist to it. They might consider new things and attitude threatening. Hofstede (1980) believes that this term means to what extent a culture brings up their members attached to orders, structures and regulations. And how is their feedback to unknown and shocking conditions. According to Hofstede (1986) Asian students might undergo more anxiety and confront more uncomfortable situations due to criteria of uncertainty avoidance in their culture. He believes that one of the characteristics of Asian culture is that they avoid ambiguity and uncertainty, and they prefer rules and orders. Uncertainty causes stress and anxiety for them.

**Long-term short-term orientation:** it refers to how much a culture is future oriented or cares for the desires of present. (Rienties et al, 2013). Societies with long-term orientation features have strong work ethics, they are persistent, and respect hierarchy. Being flexible and personal adaptability is important. Leisure times are not very important, and they rather save for the future rewards. But, societies with short term orientation features desire immediate and fast outcomes. Personal stability is appreciated. Hierarchy is not valued. Leisure time is important and they do not consider saving.

In Long term orientation cultures, emphasis is on promoting characteristics such as perseverance and thrifts, toward future achievements. While in short-term orientation cultures, people are encouraged to foster present/past oriented virtues such as traditions, and accomplishing social duties, and face preservation. (Hofstede, 2001)

## **Persian Culture**

According to Hofstede's (1986) categorization of cultures, Persian culture is regarded as a highly collectivist culture, in which people appreciate connections and in-group values. Gable (1959) underlines the significance and importance of personal connectedness in Persian culture. Persian culture with masculine features in it contains strong role distributions among genders and prescribes different norms, behaviors and b patterns for men and women; for example men are considered as being strong, tough and material oriented, while women are regarded as being tender and emotional. There are major power distances among people and hierarchy is very important. Furthermore, people look for regulations and patterns, and they avoid uncertainty, and feel stressed in unfamiliar situations.

Based on Hall's (1976) classification of cultures which categorizes cultures as low context or high context, Iran can be considered as a mostly high context culture. It means that when interacting in an Iranian culture as a more implicit culture, detailed information are not

required, and the information is perceived according to the context and based on the understanding of the receiver.

Cultures can be categorized as either direct or indirect (Ting-Toomy, 1998). Iran is considered to be in indirect class. Communication patterns tend to be more implicit and indirect in Iran and even being too direct might be considered as disrespect of others. Furthermore, negative opinions and criticism are presented indirectly to others, or in many cases people may prefer not to share disapproval.

Iran is considered among the ten top countries which send and receive many immigrants. Nowadays more than 4 million Iranians live abroad (Naghdi, 2010). The table illustrates the number of Iranians in Sweden whose birth place is out of Sweden. As it is presented in the table, 67211 Iranians (birthplace out of Sweden) lives in Sweden at 2013. (SCB, 2013)

**Table 2 Iranians (Utrikes födda)<sup>4</sup> in Sweden, by year and gender**

Year	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Men	27700	27955	28309	28505	28848	29045	29584	29961	30501	31567	32686	33564	34402	35198
Women	23401	23889	24412	24736	25134	25425	26163	26555	27162	28355	29432	30264	31247	32013

In a research about Iranian people in Sweden, it was found that mostly the reason for their emigrations is seeking more education, pursuit of better life or marriages. Furthermore, 42 % of Iranians in Sweden were employed in public due to their high level of education. (Naghdi, 2010)

### Swedish Culture

Sweden is one of the highly individualistic countries (Hofstede, 1980). Allwood (1999) also believes that Swedes cultural patterns, behaviors and communication strategies imply high levels of self-sufficiency attitudes that contribute to personal independence. Furthermore, Barinaga (1999) discusses that in the line of individualism vs. collectivism, the choice of a culture to employ self-oriented attitudes and looking after one self, or at the other hand taking care of others, categorizes a culture somewhere in the line.

According to Tomasson (1970) Swedes, as an example of individualistic cultures, appreciate privacy, and this is regarded as a prime feature of Scandinavian cultures. However, Daun (1991) believes that Swedish people seek for collective support for their perspectives and opinions. The hallmark of a Swedish society is collective solution. Stromberg (1991) names this term as “cooperative individualism, while Lindkvist (1988) suggests “collective individualism”. He further mentions that Swedish society is a combination of socialism and individualism. Individualism does not mean selfishness, it rather means self-fulfillment.

There is low power distance in Sweden, and power is distributed more equally. Swedish culture is regarded an individualistic culture, with little masculine features in it, in other words there are rarely gender discriminations and imbalance in Sweden. There are low degrees of uncertainty avoidance in this culture, and people do not seek patterns and

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<sup>4</sup> birthplace out of Sweden

regulations to escape uncertainty. Finally, Sweden is categorized as a short term orientation culture, in which features such as quick results, leisure times, spending, present orientations, investing in mutual funds, personal stability, and “face” saving are valued, while hierarchy, saving and struggling for future rewards and flexibility is not sought for. (Hofstede, 1986)

### Iranian VS Swedish culture:

According to Hofstede (1997) as illustrated in the following table:

Iran and Sweden have different cultural dimensions. Iranian and Swedish people are from totally different cultures and have different cultural values, beliefs, patterns, norms and attitudes.

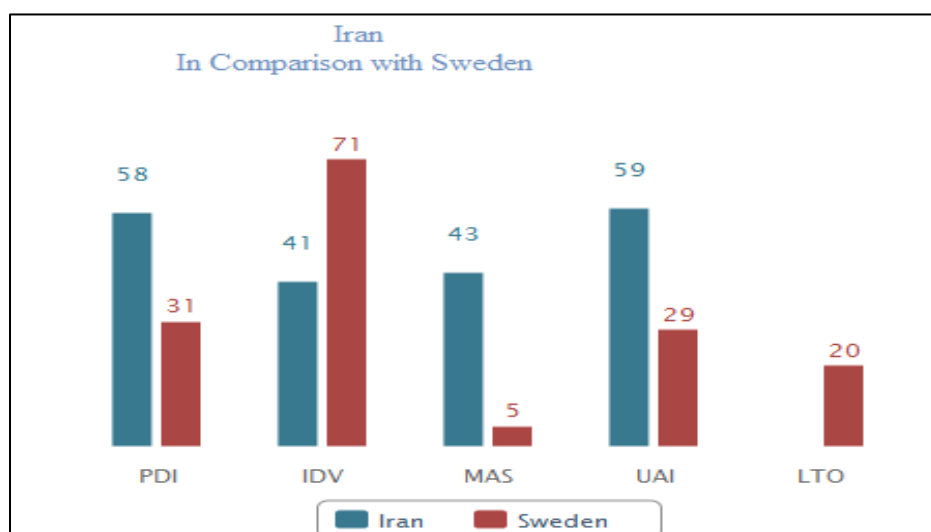


Figure 1: Cultural Differences of Iran & Sweden; power-distance, individualism–collectivism, masculinity–femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term–short-term orientation.

### Intercultural communication:

Intercultural communication is sharing of information among people from different cultures and different levels of awareness, with different levels of control (Allwood, 1985). Ting-Toomy (1999) believes that intercultural communication is symbolic exchange and negotiation of shared meaning in the interactions of people from different cultures. Bennet (2003) defines intercultural communication as being able to interpret different patterns and styles of communication such as verbal/nonverbal behaviors, gestures and norms.

According to Bennet (2003), and Klien and Chen (2001) to be able to interact properly and have a mutual understandings between people from different cultures, it is important to know our own culture well, and try to find the differences and similarities between cultures. By appreciating and accepting the differences and similarities one can step into intercultural competency.

Penny (1993) distinguishes the differences between terms commonly employed in intercultural communication studies; He defines “adjustment” as the reaction of a person in constructing harmony and balance with his/her environment. “Adaption” means that human

beings changes to survive when the environment changes, in the same way as other creatures. He believes that “acculturation” is when the culture of a group is perceived weaker, and the members of the weaker culture accept and employ the patterns and values of the stronger culture. He defines “Assimilation” as the abandoning of one’s original ethnic culture and values, and accepting culture, norms, and values of the majority group in that society. But he regards “Integration” as the changes happening in a whole society in order to facilitate the presence of newcomers. (Penny 1993, pp.13-15)

### Culture Shock:

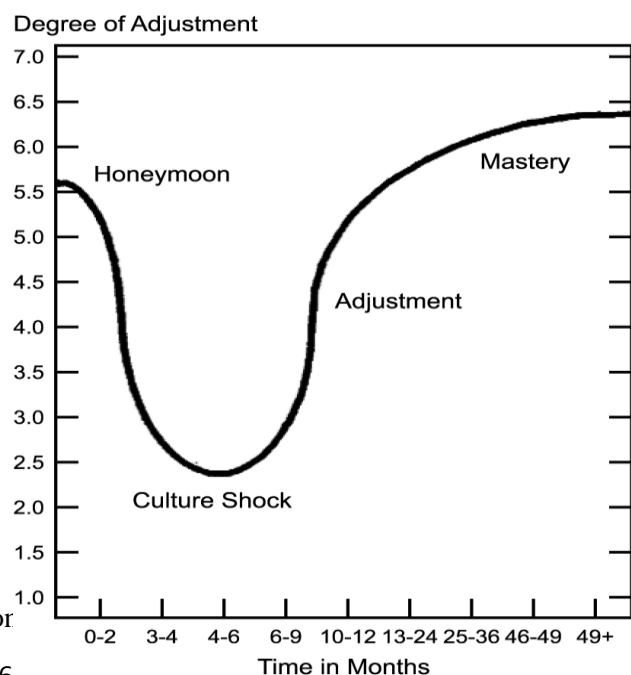
The effects of culture shock and study shock<sup>5</sup>, and their impacts on the international students have been the subject of many studies, including L1 and L2 acquisition, cross-cultural psychology, multicultural and international education, intercultural communication and other fields (Burns, 1991; Chen, 1999; Furnham, 1997). Culture shock is also studied in anthropology, educating abroad (Church 1982) and corporate contexts (Black and Mendenhall 1991).

Oberg (1960) used “culture shock” for the first time in his PhD thesis. Oberg is an anthropologist who referred to culture shock as “a malady, an occupational disease of people who have been suddenly transplanted abroad”. Berger (1963) that it is the effects of a totally new environment and culture and the stresses it cause on new comers. Orberg (1954) discussed the challenges of entering to a new culture, while Pedersen (1994) claims that culture shock commonly happens in the first months of entrance, and it gradually sets in after this period. He describes the “U curve” model and defines it as 3-to-5 stage procedure. He explains it as progressions that begin firstly by attraction, exploration, hopefulness, or enthusiasm, and he names it “the honeymoon stage”. He believes that senses of "insufficiency, dissatisfaction, disappointment, alienation" will follow the first stage. Pedersen continues that finally and in the last stage, new comers will recover and settle down, and the new environment is familiar for them, and their self-confidence is reestablished.

### Stages of culture shock

Oberg (1960) believes in four stages for culture shock: “Incubation, crisis, recovery, and full recovery”. Adler (1975) counts five stages including: “Contact, disintegration, reintegration, autonomy, and independence.” However in studies affecting academic education, these terms are known as U-Curve and are usually presented as below:

- “1. Honeymoon stage
2. Grief (confusion/disintegration) stage



<sup>5</sup> study shock is caused by the difference in education

Figure 2 Stages of Culture Shock



3. Re-integration stage;
4. Self-government/ adjustment stage
5. Independence stage”

### **Academic/Social Adjustment & Integration:**

Communication issues affects hugely on the academic performances of the students. The reason why the effects of culture shock are discussed is due to the constructive views of Ryan & Hellmundt (2005) and socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) known for its deep perspectives on teaching and learning. They believe that “learning is individually constructed, socially supported, and a culturally mediated behavior”. This perspective presents the effects of internal and external factors on learning, and shows that academic performances needs the students mental and mega cognitive effort and is also culturally bounded. (Eggen, P & Kauchak, D, 1999)

Baker and Siryk (1999) also argue that the academic/social integration of students will affect their academic performance. They define four criteria for academic assimilation: “academic/ social/personal/emotional adjustment and attachment”. Academic adjustment explains the degree to which students deal with different educational requirements and the academic environment. Social adjustment refers to the interaction level of students and how they participate in group works and activities. The personal and emotional adjustment describes the level of anxiety caused by assimilating into a new academic way of life. And the last one, attachment describes how committed students are to the institution goals. These four criteria are connected to the degree of study performance. (Credé & Niehorster, 2012)

Another issue that affects the academic performance of students is social support. Low social support will led them to depression and anxiety and therefore it reduces their educational excellence. (Sumer et al, 2008) (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al, 2006). Olwig (2011) believes that integration of the new comers to the society helps them enjoy mobility, from social and economic points of view. Therefore, according to castles and Miller (2009) modern countries have provided facilities and opportunities for the better cultural integration of the immigrants. According to Nordin (2005) integration and adjusting into a new society have never been convenient and easy for new comers of any nation. Furthermore, it was many times harder for non-European people entering an insular society such as Sweden. (Nordin, 2005)

### **Language Issues:**

Students may suffer from lack of language comprehension in western societies and academic system. This leads to anxiety for international students studying abroad and Chen (1999) names it “second-language anxiety” from the psychosocial point of view. Many studies have analyzed the influences of English proficiency on the academic and social adjustment of international students (Poyrazli et al. 2002). This is related to the fact that how much the students can communicate their academic/social/psychological problems.

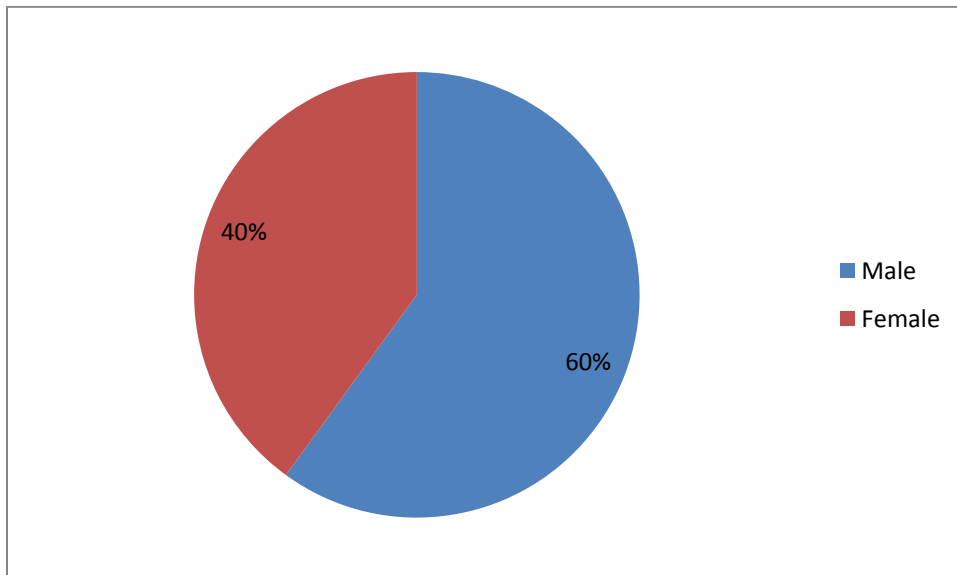
Many studies show the importance of host language proficiency in a proper cross-cultural interaction. Ward and Kennedy (1999) admit that the better the language proficiency of international is, more properly they will interact in the new society. There are many scientists that believe competence in the host language is one of the core steps of acculturation process (Verthelyi, 1995).

## Results:

In this part results of questionnaires are illustrated through charts, and explanations are presented. At the end the summary of the quantitative results is discussed. Furthermore, literature and data driven themes are categorized and then results from the interviews are presented. At the end, the summary of qualitative results is discussed.

### Results of the questionnaires

As shown in the figures 1, 2, and 3; 60% of the participants are male, and 40% are females. 27 out of 30 participants wrote their age in the age section. The average age of the participants is 31years old. 57 % of them have started their PhD studies in Sweden more than two years ago, while 43% have started their PhD studies less than two years. Furthermore, 67% studied their master program in Sweden, and 33% of the participants took their master degree not in Sweden.



Figur 3 Participants'gender distirbution

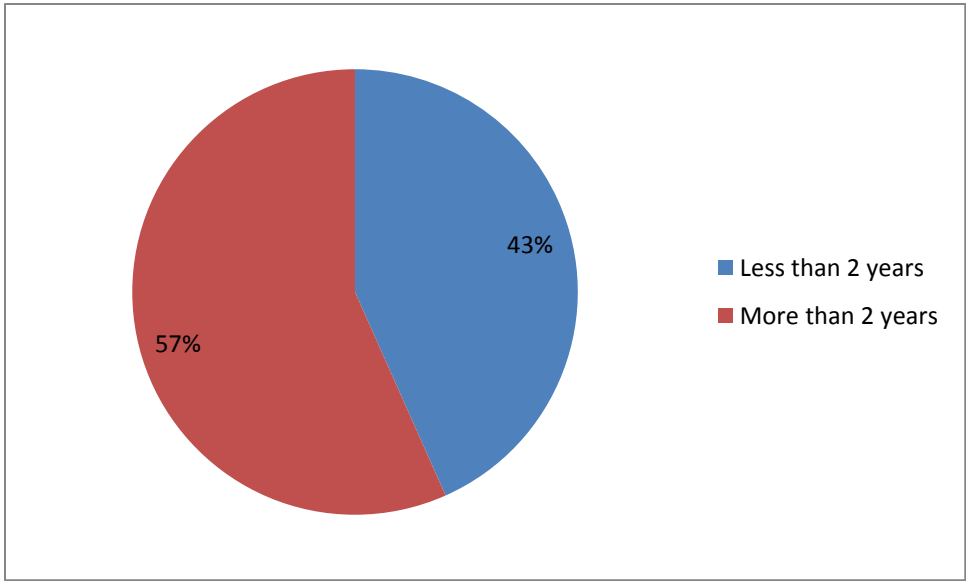


Figure 4 Participants' start of PhD studies

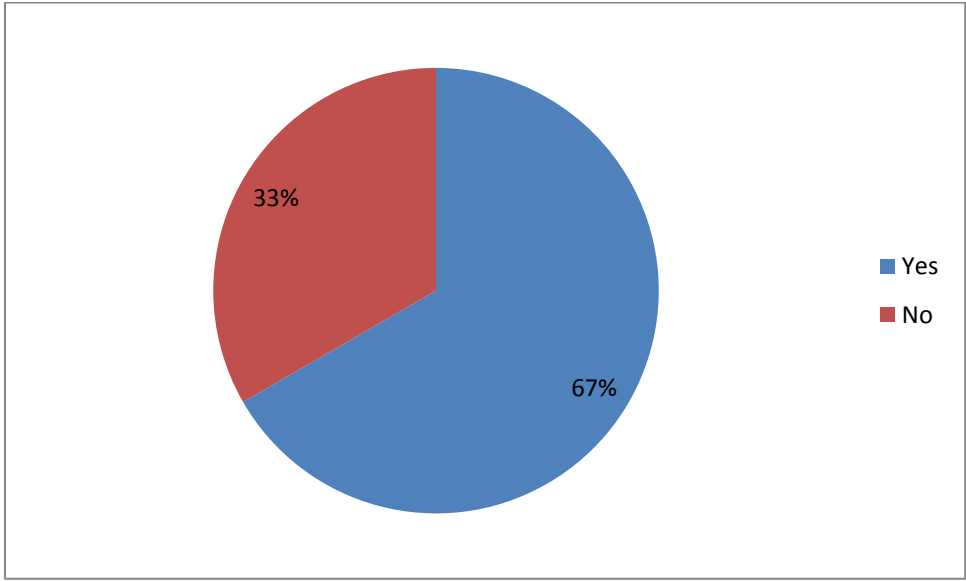
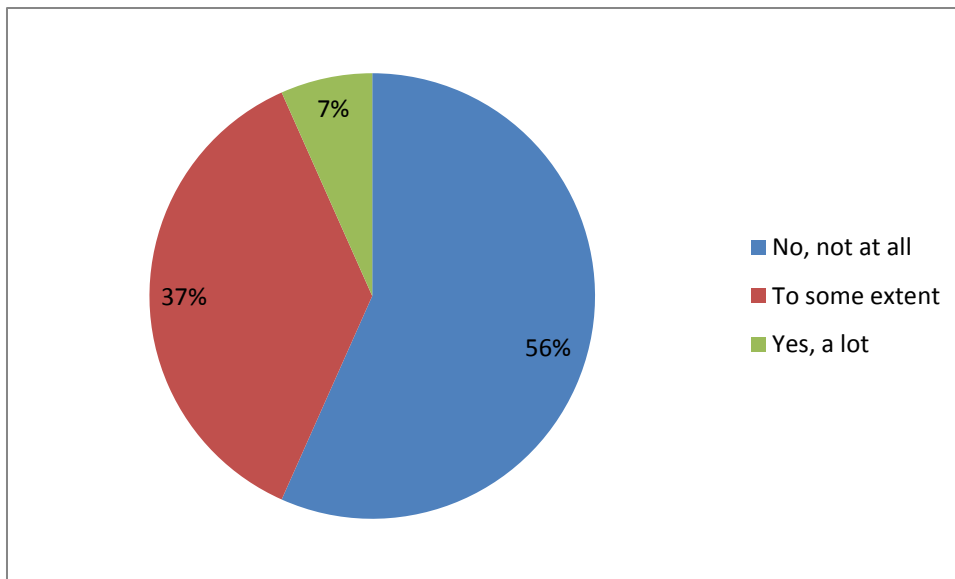


Figure 5 Previous experience of Swedish academic environment

As shown in Figure 4; 56% of the participants believed they did not experience any English language (including reading, writing and listening) problems. 37% experienced minor English language problems, and 7% had many English language problems in the first months of employment ad a PhD.



Figur 6 English language proficiency

Figure 5 illustrates that 23% of the participants believed that culture shock strongly impacted on their academic improvement when they first started their PhD studies. The effects of immigration and also entering to a new academic environment and workplace imposed them experience home sickness, financial and social problems, cultural differences and frustration a lot. 54% believed that effects of immigration impacted n their studies to some extent, while the other 23% claimed that effects of immigration did not impact on their studies and academic improvement at all.

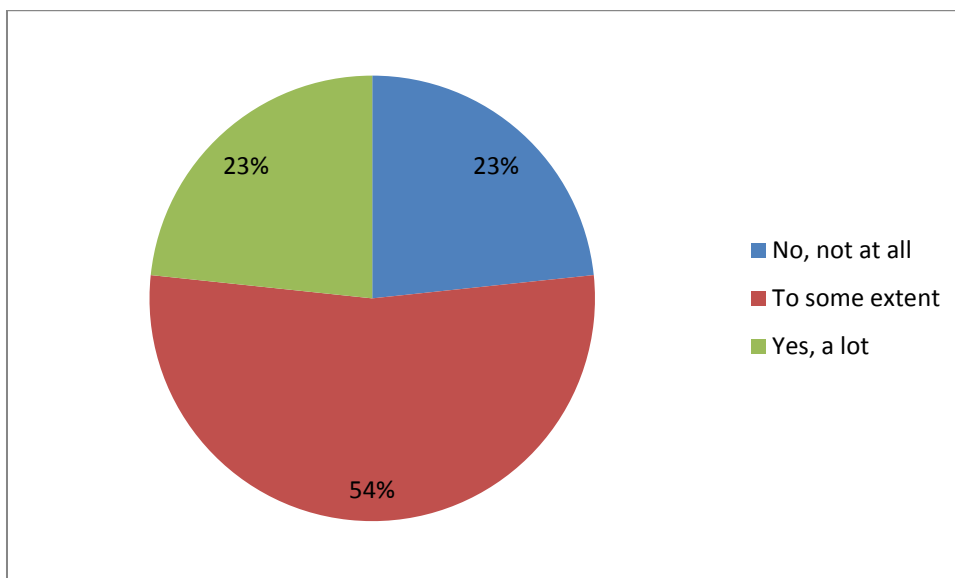


Figure 7 Culture shock impacts on studies

Figure 6 shows that in coping with the cultural differences in the academic workplace; 77% said that they try to be flexible, and do what others do. They learn the new routines and patterns by observing other employees behaviors and attitudes in the workplace, and following the same patterns in similar situations. Only 17% claimed that they ask the staff about the norms and patterns directly. 6% of the participants said in order to cope with

cultural differences and learn the new rules, patterns and orders in the new academic workplace they both ask the staff directly and try to learn the patterns by observing what others do and behave in different situations.

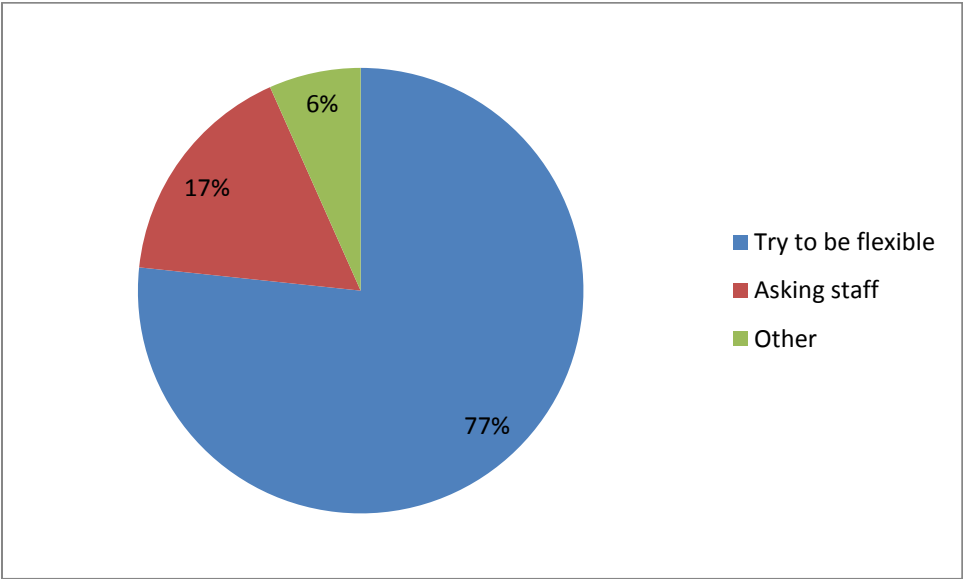


Figure 8 ways of coping with cultural differences

As presented in figure 7, in terms of cultural differences, 47% believed that Swedish Language problems are the main obstacle in their way to improve academically. 43% wrote that lack of intercultural communication knowledge and difference in Cultural/social patterns and norms are the main obstacles for them in their academic improvement. 10% believed in other obstacles and problems, such as lack of information sharing.

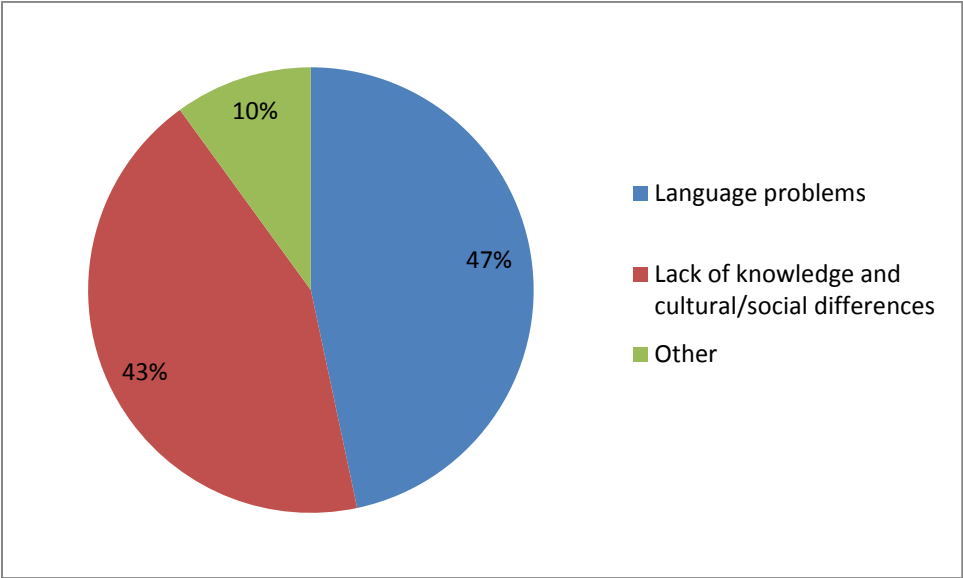


Figure 9 Main obstacles to improve socially and academically

Figure 8 illustrates that 87% of the participants experienced major differences in PhD educational systems of Sweden and Iran. They believed Sweden has a better PhD educational system, so they preferred PhD studies in Sweden. Only 7% of the participants preferred Iran

PhD educational system. And 6% observed no differences between Sweden and Iran PhD system, but they preferred Sweden.

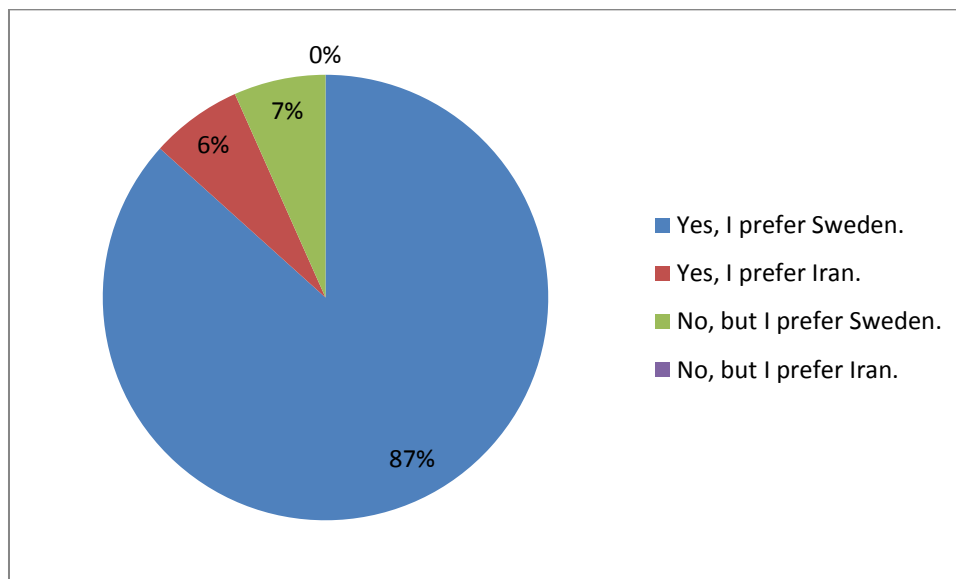
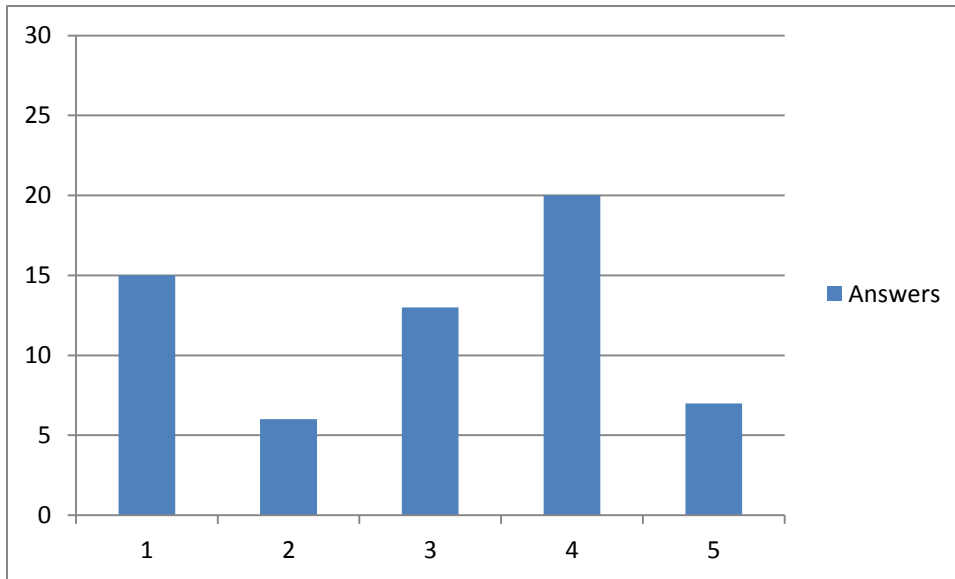


Figure 10 different educational systems

The last question was a multiple choice questions which provided the participants with the opportunity to choose more than one answer to the question. The question was: “which of the following did you experience in the first days of your employment?” 20 out of 30 participants said they had fewer subjects/topics to talk, due to lack of knowledge about contemporary social, political, daily issues in Sweden, and also less intimacy with the professor and non-Iranian staff. 15 participants asserted they were surprised by the attitude and behavior of students toward professors. 13 participants said they were afraid to say/do something and it will be considered as not polite or in contradict to social norms in Sweden, and it causes problem. 7 out of 30 participants said that sometimes they had educational related problems, but were shy to ask for solutions because they didn’t know how the cultural/social pattern in Sweden is.



**Figure 11 Different intercultural experiences at academic workplace**

The table below shows the answers provided to the participant for the last question, as well as the exact number of participants who chose a specific answer.

**Table 3 Provided answers to the last question of the questionnaire**

1	I was shocked by the behaviors of students toward professors.	15
2	I was shocked by differences in daily time schedule, such as meal time, breaks and fika.	6
3	I was afraid to say/do something, and it will be considered as not polite or in contradict to social norms, and it cause problem.	13
4	I had fewer subjects to talk, due to lack of knowledge about contemporary social, political, daily issues in Swede. And less intimacy with the professor and non-Iranian staff.	20
5	Sometimes I had educational related problems, but I was shy to ask for solutions because I didn't know how the cultural/social pattern in Sweden is.	7

### **Summary of the results of questionnaire:**

30 participants took part in the survey which was conducted through questionnaire. They were 60% males, and 40% females. The average age was "31". 57% started their PhD studies more than two years ago, while 43% started their PhD studies less than two years ago. 67% of the participants took their master's degree in Sweden, while 33% took their master's degree somewhere else.

The results from questionnaire show that most of the participants are proficient at English language, and it is not a problem for them. Majority of the participants believed that culture shock impacted on their studies. The majority also claimed that when confronting with cultural differences in the academic workplace they try to be flexible and do what others do by observing their behaviors and attitudes in the workplace, and following the same patterns in similar situations. Discussing the main obstacles to improve socially and academically, 47% believed that Swedish language problems are their main obstacles, while 43 % claimed that lack of intercultural communication knowledge and difference in Cultural/social patterns and norms are their main obstacles to improve socially and academically. Furthermore, 87%



of the participants experienced major differences in PhD educational systems of Sweden and Iran. They believed Sweden has a better PhD educational system, so they preferred PhD studies in Sweden. Moreover, the majority of the participants asserted that they had fewer subjects/topics to talk, due to lack of knowledge about contemporary social, political, daily issues in Sweden, and also less intimacy with the professor and non-Iranian staff. The results from questionnaire shows that culture related values, behaviors and attitudes play significant role in the communication styles of the subjects, for example half of the participants claimed that they were surprised by the attitude and behavior of students toward professors. Or 13/30 asserted that they were afraid to say/do something and it will be considered as not polite or in contradicts to social norms in Sweden, and it causes problem. To investigate the topic more precisely, results of in depth interviews are presented in the following pages.

### Results of the Interviews:

In this part, interviews with 11 Iranian PhD students are presented. For ethical issues, names of the participants and other personal information are removed. Every interviewee has received a number from 1 to 11. Therefore, the numbers in front of every quotation implies that it is said by a specific interviewee. Moreover, the quotes of the interviewees are translated from Persian to English language. The profile of the interviewees is presented in the table below:

**Table 4 Profile of the 11 participants<sup>6</sup> of interviews**

Code	Time in Sweden	Gender	Master degree in Sweden
1	6 years	Female	Yes
2	2 years	Male	No
3	2/5 years	Male	Yes
4	3 years	Female	No
5	3/5 years	Male	Yes
6	4 years	Female	Yes
7	2 yeras	Female	No
8	6 years	Female	Yes
9	4 years	Male	No
10	2 years	Female	No
11	5/5 years	Male	Yes

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<sup>6</sup> **A PhD at Chalmers:** In order to obtain a doctoral degree, four years of full-time study are needed. Education includes acquisition of knowledge through research and courses. Often, the research is organized within a research group and it is supervised by an experienced researcher, who is the supervisor. Most of the research groups work internationally. Doctoral students are regarded as employees at Chalmers; usually they are involved in departmental duties and teaching activities, mostly as räkneövning leader or lab supervisors. These institutional task my nit exceed 20% of their study time. The four-year study time can therefore be extended to a five-year full time study.

### Categorization of the results:

Due to the qualitative nature of this study, more focus is on the narratives and experiences of Iranian PhD students. Data is categorized according to Hofstede's (1986) classification of cultures to different dimensions, among them; **Power-distance, Uncertainty avoidance, gender, collectivistic vs. individualistic**. Some differences in communication patterns namely **greeting patterns, ta'arof, addressing/name-calling** which are the results of differences in cultural dimensions<sup>7</sup> presented by Hofstede (1986), are also added. Moreover, categorization according to the definition of culture shock and its stages (presented in Literature review page. 16) is provided; **Culture shock, adaptation and Mastery, and time factor**. One of the questions of this thesis is: "How is their social and academic integration and adaptation?" therefore the study also tries to identify the participants' social and academic obstacles, as well as their method of coping with obstacles, and the following criteria are also included; **Obstacles, educational obstacles, The way of coping with obstacles, Impacts of Swedish Language on academic improvement, Impacts of Swedish Language on social integration, Swedish; as a mandatory course?, Culture-related differences in educational systems/ teaching method, What they wish to add/change for better academic/social adjustment of PhD students?** Finally, due to the frequency of some issues in the explanations of the interviewees, two other relevant categorizations are added; **personal traits, food schedule**.

### Culture shock:

As the main issue under investigation in this thesis, I devoted more time on this topic, and gave the interviewees as much time, as they needed to talk freely about their experiences, emotions, ups and downs, and everything related to cultural differences they met.

All the interviewees asserted they have undergone the culture shock period. However the main causes and the length of this period were different among them. Majority of the interviewees said that they experienced feelings of insufficiency in first months/years of their entrance to Sweden. It is because they did not have knowledge about Sweden, its cultural and social patterns and norms, and they were unaware of how is the society working in Sweden. This entering to a new environment without initial information and preparing caused feelings of loneliness and insufficiency for them. They were more knowledgeable about other European countries through the media, but less about Sweden.

*"When I came to Sweden, I didn't know the Swedish norms and cultural codes. In different situations, I had my own/personal interpretations, and it used to make the way harder. I didn't know what the people's behaviors and sayings mean."* 5

Interviewees talked about their initial feelings and experiences. The sudden absence of all familiar signs, symbols and cultural patterns imposed them stress. Besides the new culture and society, and weather, sudden absence of Persian culture, imposed them feeling of loneliness.

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<sup>7</sup> These 3 themes are results of a significant characteristic of Persian culture, namely *hierarchy* and *power distance*.

When somewhere they saw Persian related things, such as events, foods, clothes, books, they got happy and felt better.

*“All things, all I could see from social patterns, values, weather, foods, music everything was different. Though I liked most of the new things, but I was depressed to the sudden absence of familiar signs and environment to me.” 10*

*“There are some things (routines/patterns) that you have used to it in your home country, and when suddenly you don’t see them, you completely feel their absence.” 1*

Furthermore they missed their parents, families and familiar faces in Iran. In the first months of their entrance they felt like a stranger, a guest in Sweden. They felt depressed and frustrated, they missed home. Even one of them believed that emotionally he started from zero and gradually and after a period of time, when he was adjusted, he started to rise and get better and happier. Now it feels like home, in Sweden.

*“The first two years of my stay at Sweden, I felt depressed and homesick often. I was not addicted to the darkness, and windy weather of Gothenburg. I missed the sun.” 11*

*“I was not culturally shocked. I was depressed. I missed my home. Here I was a stranger. From my energetic, warm-blooded, happy, and loving family and friends I was suddenly put into a cold and dark place. Somewhere I knew little about... I just missed everything about my home”. 6*

High educated people are treated respectfully in Iran, since in Persian culture education and especially highly engagement in studies and researches was/is appreciated throughout the history, and among Iranians. When someone is highly educated, he is not considered an ordinary person, and is treated differently from others. In Iran, high educated people are usually mature at different things, and are aware of most social, cultural, political issues. Iranian PhD students choose to immigrate/go to Sweden for better quality of education, excellent facilities, outstanding research and studies opportunities, as well as for more international environment for academic growth. Their reason for entering to a new country might be different from other sorts of immigrants. According to two of the interviewees it was not easy for them to put away something they were good at (Persian culture, social patterns, value), and learn/adopt a new culture.

Another interviewee explained about his/her position in Iran when he was aware of everything and felt very skillful in handling many aspects of life, but In Sweden, due to lack of his information about most things he feels incapable of doing things.

*“I liked my culture and the person I was in Iran. But when we enter into a new country and culture, we are obliged to forget our patterns, values and norms, and be someone without social knowledge in the new environment. Here I have lost my winning card. I am not as confident as before, because there are many things I don’t have knowledge about. Here I may seem like an illiterate person... it is hard for me to make a new identity for myself, new patterns and values that I am not good at them.” 11*

All the interviewees have experienced culture shock. To summarize the culture shock related experiences of Iranian PhD students, the main causes of “crisis” period can be categorized to four categories. The crisis stage took place in different length and in different ways for them. (1) Some of them strongly felt the sudden absence of Persian cultural patterns, familiar values, signs, symbols, attitudes, and customs (2)The other group missed their parents, families and the familiar environment. These two reasons (1 and 2) imposed them feelings of homesickness, depression, and loneliness. (3) The third group felt they are insufficient in a Swedish society, because they were unaware of social and cultural attitudes, patterns, and values. They did not know how everything is working in Sweden. (4) And the last minor group experienced low self-confidence , and low self-estimation, due to the fact that from an environment in which they were admired due to their matureness in studies and many other criteria, they came to a new different environment in which they had lack of knowledge about many social, cultural, political, daily issues.

### **Disintegration**

The fact that the interviewees were conversant of cultural and communicational patterns in Iran, but unaware of cultural, social values and codes in Sweden led them experience feelings of insufficiency and inadequacy. The reaction to these unawareness caused “**disintegration**” as discussed by some interviews:

*“When I first entered as a PhD, I didn’t know what the favorite topic to talk here in Sweden is. So I kept quiet and preferred to be silent” 8*

*“So, I chose to be silent from the very first moment. I could not talk. I didn’t have fantastic experiences to talk about”11*

Some of the interviewees said that in first months/years of their coming to Sweden, they chose to be silent, because they were unaware of the cultural, social and daily topics in Sweden. They did not know what is interesting to talk about, or what the current Swedish issues are. Moreover, they were unaware of the social interaction patterns and rules; they did not know what are the accepted topics, and also manners of behavior. Therefore in the “crisis” stage of culture shock period, they were disintegrated from the society.

### **Adaptation/Mastery:**

After interviewees explained about the initial difficult time, interestingly all the participants mentioned that after a period of time they *gradually* got adapted and adjusted to the environment and now they feel okay. They were not asked what happened after “crisis” stage. This question was planned to be asked after they are finished explaining their period of difficulties. However, their unanimous answer to my planned question (which was supposed to be about what happened after the period of crisis and if you got adapted or not), strongly showed their gradual adaption, mastery or matureness over the obstacles and confirmed the fact that after a period of crisis, they learned what and how to behave, or at least they got used to differences and got adapted.

*“But gradually I distinguished how I can be engaged in conversations and what are interesting topics in a Swedish environment.” 8*

*“...But gradually you become used to their absence again, and then it is not strange for you anymore, even you feel very ok with the new routines.” I*

The above mentioned quotes strongly present the gradual progression of interviewees toward integration and adjustment. All of them asserted that after the crisis time passed, they started to feel better and better. They were observing and learning the Swedish culture, values, communicational patterns, rules and norms.

*“...Then after a period of time, gradually I learned how Swedes cope with such issues, and I tried to adapt myself. For example now, when it is winter we always go to warm and sunny places.” II*

They passed the crisis stage and went toward integration, and mastery, in different ways that will be discussed in “ways of coping” in next pages. The important thing is that all of them asserted that gradually and little by little, they learned the new patterns, values, attitudes, rules, and in one world; Swedish “society. After a period of time that was different among the interviewees they got mature at Swedish culture. They found out there are differences among different people/cultures. And they should be flexible and open minded; no culture is better/worse than others, and one thing that is considered good in one culture may be bad in another one.

Those who have passed the crisis stage and are now completely in “mastery” stage, feel they are integrated very well, both socially and academically. They feel they are part of the society. Now they know what to do, and how to behave in different situations. They have got used to many Swedish norms and cultural patterns, and they may employ Swedish style in some or many of their attitudes. Many of them feel like home in Sweden, and are happy and relax in the Swedish environment. Finally, in the “Mastery” stage, most of the patterns, rules, orders, behaviors are familiar for them

#### **Time Factor:**

Most of the interviews believed that time is a very important factor in gradual progress and successful integration to the new work/study environment and society. The word “gradually” was heard several times in their talking about their adaption to the new environment. The time space between the crisis and adaption or matureness differs person to person based on different factors, including personal traits and the conditions and situations the interviewees had.

*“My integration and adjustment to Sweden went on gradually and even slowly. When I first entered Sweden, it was just university, academic staff and studying until two years. After that when I could find myself and my position properly, I started to feel part of the society.”9*

Since PhD students have to study/work hard from the very beginning of their entrance to Sweden and should be present at the academic work environment morning to evening. Most of them mentioned that their integration to the Swedish society was very slow, or have not happened yet. The interviewees mentioned that they did not have time and were not focused

to study Swedish language in the first year of their PhDs to be able to be interacting and get aware of Swedish culture. The only encounters they had with Swedish people was with their supervisors and other staff, that was mostly academic interactions and were held in Swedish. Therefore, being very engaged in studies, research and work at the university imposed them the lengthier culture shock and period of unawareness of the Swedish culture and Swedish society.

### Greeting Patterns

A behavior that is very normal in Iran, and is regarded as a norm and value and a friendly behavior, might not be regarded the same in other countries such as Sweden. Saying “Hello” is very important in the beginning of interactions in Different contexts in Iran. At workplace, at the school or university, in ceremonies and parties and other places, if you know someone due to previous encounters, it is the norm to go and say hi and even shake hands. Not saying “hi” or not asking “how are you”, may seem hostile in Persian culture. If two people don’t greet each other it conveys that they don’t like each other and it shows traces of disrespect. As most of the interviewees believed communication patterns in first encounters with new people, or following encounters with the same people are totally different in Persian and Swedish culture. In Sweden, people shake hands when they are just met and introduced to each other for the first time, but in Iran people may shake hands whenever they see each other. “Hugging” is a usual greeting pattern in Sweden when for friends and family, but in Iran shaking hands and kissing cheeks are the most dominant pattern of starting or ending a social interaction. Even in text messages in Sweden, people write “Hugs” and “kisses” at the end of their text. But, in Iran they mostly write “kisses” in the end of their messages. Since the focus of this study is not communication in written text, I suggest this area of studies, for further researches.

*“I see people sometimes don’t say hi to each other, but they may talk to each other ten minutes later! I can’t understand this even now after I have been in Sweden more than two years. In Iran your conversation won’t get start if you haven’t greeted each other.” 2*

*“The first months of my PhD, I thought nobody likes me. Several experiences made this thought significant for me., whenever I entered our room in the morning I used to say a warm hi with a smile to another PhD student, and was waiting for a little conversation or usual greetings. But instead there was just a hi or even silence. Or in the evening I wanted to go and say goodbye, but after two or three times of failure, I thought maybe I am bothersome or there is something wrong with me. I even tried to say “hi” louder. However, after a while he started to say hi/goodbye every now and then. Also I became more familiar with different attitudes. I was not shocked about that behavior anymore.” 1*

As presented above, the greeting patterns of Iranians and Swedes are different. Each culture had a special way of greetings, and lack of intercultural knowledge may lead to misunderstandings. In Persian culture it is very important to say hi/bye to someone you know. Not employing the patterns of greeting in Iran, may imply impoliteness or dislike.

## Ta'arof\*

A very significant element in Persian culture is *ta'arof*. The practice of *ta'arof* or doing *ta'arof* is an important way to show mutual respect. It is hard to translate the term to English or Swedish, since this act is usually nonexistent in English or Swedish cultures. However, we can mention a couple of words which they all together can to some extent convey the meaning of *ta'arof*; it is a combination of *etiquette*, *good manner*, *humbleness* and *respect*, while emphasizing the *hierarchy*. It means *to be polite* and *generous* and *to serve* or *offer to others* and *to flatter* or *to compliment*, or *to be differential*.

*ta'arof* is very important in encounters and interactions, and several minutes of every conversation is spent on *ta'arof*. It is a friendly behavior and practicing *ta'arof* implies that the participants in the interaction respect each other. There are some routine and previously designed sentences that people use when they see each other or in the cases *ta'arof* is expected. Even some of the expressions or acts people use for *ta'arof* differs between men and women. Most of Iranians are aware of these *ta'arof* expressions or acts, however, *ta'arof* may even differ from a region to a region or from a context to another context. Tough, it is necessary to mention that these *ta'arof* practices may be less among very close or intimate family members, relatives or friends. *ta'arof* is a core cultural pattern in Persian culture and every child learns it. *ta'arof* is accepted among most people as a way of respect, goodness and sometimes giving benefit to others. Not practicing *ta'arof* may imply “wrath”, “disrespect” or “dislike” of others. (Beeman, 1986)

Most of the interviewees mentioned some cases of *ta'arof*, and the fact that in the first months/years of their stay, they strongly employed and practiced *ta'arof*, but gradually they found out this act is not a value, distinguished or recognized in Sweden. So they tried to decrease the level of practicing *ta'arof*. They had experiences including; *ta'arof* or offering the best place and seat in a place or vehicle to your companion. *ta'arof* and bringing presents to others after they're back from travels. *ta'arof* and not saying bad things or criticizing them face to face. Also some of the interviewees mentioned that in some occasions they wanted to use *ta'arof* expressions, but they couldn't find the proper English/Swedish equivalents for them.

*“Once I went out to a nearby restaurant with my Swedish supervisor. He kindly offered to pay for my launch. I wanted to say no thank you, let me pay, and you be my guest. But then I remembered here is not Iran and there is no need for ta'arof or struggling over paying. When a Swedish person is offering something, he really wants to do that. So, with a smile I said thank you and I accepted his offer. I liked his friendly behavior.” 3*

In Iran when somebody offers to pay for you, there will be a big challenge between you and the person; you insist on not accepting the offer, and the person will say “no, you should be my guest!” Even then you will say: “no, you should be my guest I'll pay for you” and in the end the person who can pay the money to the shopman faster will win and can pay for something.

*“Several times people offered me coffee or a piece of their cake or food, and I was shy to say yes I want. Because usually in Iran when someone is offering something you may say*

*no for the first time, and if that person offered more, then you say ok thank you yes I want. So, here I missed many delicious things just because I thought the person who is offering me will offer more if I say “No”. Now I have learned that if I want something I should say “yes” when someone is offering.” 2*

As disused above, Iranian PhD students employ rules of ta’arof in their interaction with others. However after observing that ta’arof is not working at Sweden, they try to behave as Swedes do, and put away ta’arof. Nevertheless, some said that deep within their heart they feel that it is not proper when they don’t behave based on ta’arof.

*“As in Iran, whenever I wanted to eat something I offered it to people, and tried to encourage them to have a piece or share my food. In the first months I did these offerings to others, but the very strange thing was once that my colleague thought I am offering my food, because I don’t like it. She said: “aha, you didn’t like it?” ... gradually I leaned that here you may eat what you have prepared without offering to others and it is not bad or offensive, it is very ok. So, I started not to offer my food/sweetmeat to others. However, still now I offer to others sometimes, but just one time and doubtfully. Deep within me I think it is bad to eat something and others just watch, maybe they want a piece” I*

ta’arof, a core cultural value in Iran, is strongly conducted among Persians. Employing ta’arof implies politeness, goodness, humbleness, respect and is considered a friendly behavior. However, Iranian PhD students said that in an international setting, they have learned not to act based on ta’arof, since it is not understood or valued. Moreover, they have learned not to expect ta’arof from others.

### **Gender:**

All the participants believed that male-female role distinctions are significant in Iran. Though many Iranian women have high education and are working, but women are mostly associated with light and moderate jobs, housekeeping and maternal duties. They are expected to be a good husband’s wife, a sacrificing mother and a peaceful housewife, and then the next priority would be to be successful at work. However, it differs among different personalities, and also this attitude is changing nowadays and more women are employed in high position jobs with major responsibilities. Working women are expected to do cooking, house cleaning and other duties, in the same pattern as a housewife does. In Iran fewer men take part in household work, and a father is rarely seen to cook. Among many stereotypes related to female gender, women are perceived to be compliant, good-natured, fragile, sensitive, emotional courteous and kind. Being a girl is also associated with some characteristics; girls are expected to be “nice”, “decent”, “gentle”, “bland”, “sobersided”, “quiet”, “calm”, “moderate”, “unobtrusive”, “naive”, “shy” and at the same time “sweet”, “lovely” and “venerable”. In Sweden both men and women are treated equally, and there are no or at least a few female or male specific rules. Boys and girls are raised with the same values, norms and patterns.

Based on the different attitudes toward genders in Iran and Sweden, most of the interviews mentioned some cases of cultural differences related to this criterion.



*“My supervisor said to me he’s going to be grandfather. I was excited and happy for him and after saying congratulations, I asked about the gender of the baby. Then there was a moment of silence between us, and he told me: “We don’t check it here in Sweden.” 2*

*“When my male colleagues or my supervisor sit very close to me, I feel uncomfortable, and I try to go a little back or lean back, and keep the distance between us. Or I don’t like to engage in private conversations to male colleagues. However, I’ve noticed this is okay for other girls and they feel normal and relaxed.” 4*

One of the interviewees mentioned that In Iran, the value for girls is that they should be calm and rather quiet, they should not laugh a lot and loudly. Girls should behave with prudence. Girls are stereotyped to be innocent, kind, smiling creatures:

*“I behaved in this way, as I was grown up with these values. But after two-three years at Sweden, I recognized that here there is not such a norm at all. Men and women are completely equal. No one says because you are a girl/boy you must act in this way. Girls should be social; it is a point to be able to communicate and socialize positively with people, and have good influences on them. It is good to engage in many conversations and chatting. It is good to be warm, and laugh, even loudly. So I tried to win over my shyness. I tried to be more social, and try to engage in conversations and chatting with the staff and swedes. I started to hang out with swedes and it was/is good experience for me.” 8*

Furthermore, two of the interviewees mentioned that in Iran, women are not expected to be physically strong:

*“I thought they won’t ask me and won’t expect me to move heavy things, but it was very normal and they expected and I helped.” 10*

*“In a travel, when I felt my companions are tired, I offered to help them carry their baggage. They accepted. But in Iran, it is usually the men who offer women to carry heavy things, and when a man is present, usually he is the person who will carry baggage.” 1*

As presented above there are strong male-female role distinctions in Iran. Moreover, there are specific sorts of behavioral expectations both from male and female. Therefore, when Iranians enter to new cultures with different norms and values, it takes time for them to be adapted to the new environment and new values and expectations. However, it should be added that even this strong male-female role distinction characteristic of Persian culture might be different among different families and personalities in Iran. There are people with less gender role distinctions characteristics in their attitudes and norms.

### **Hierarchy/ Power-distance**

One of the common subjects the interviewees discussed and talked about in the interview and was very important and distinguished among the other topics is related to Power distance and Hierarchy. One of the main differences between Swedish and Persian culture is the distinction between different social statuses and age. In Iran, people pay much value and respect to the older people, and consider them as wise and well-experienced. Also when a person is higher in status and position, people treat him very respectfully and often submissively. When

addressing the older person or higher status person, Iranians use plural pronouns and try to speak very politely and carefully. Titles such as “Sir/Madam” “Dr.”, “Professor” and “engineer” are also employed when addressing people. When people address those in higher statuses and positions, stronger and even several titles are used. In Sweden, However, it is completely different; rarely, titles are used. There is no visible hierarchy. Though, the hierarchy exists and it is inevitable, but it is not verbally told or seen. In academic or work environments people of different statuses might engage in friendly conversations and they do not use plural pronoun forms when talking. Addressing and name calling is also far from the rules of hierarchy, and is simply by saying the first name of the person. Therefore, When Iranian PhD students who are used to the environment full of distinct power distance in Iran, enters to Sweden, it takes time for them to be adapted to the new cultural norms and criteria. First they might not feel easy and okay with not employing the rules of hierarchy toward their superiors or older people.

Here, Hierarchy is categorized in two classes; Hierarchy Addressing/name calling, and Hierarchy in teacher-student relationship:

#### *Hierarchy in Addressing/name calling:*

As presented below, all the interviews mentioned the fact that first it was hard for them to call their supervisors/professors only by first name. However most of them overcame their shyness and now call/address higher status by first name.

*“I could not call my professors/supervisor with their first names. I was uncomfortable. It took a long time for me to be able to call my supervisor with his first name. 2*

*“After two years of PhD studies, I still can’t call my supervisor with his first name. Even in emails and written texts! I don’t write: “Hej/Hi John” or “dear John”, I only write: “Hej/hi”. Furthermore, I have my supervisor’s personal telephone number, but I never called him because I am shy to do so. It is he who calls me when it is needed. 5*

*“I was shy to call him with his first name, but then I got used to it, and now it is very okay for me to call him in his first name, and I don’t think about it anymore. 9*

*“...My supervisor is 30 years older than me; I am shy to call him only by his first name” 4*

As mentioned by many of the participants, it was inappropriate or improper for them to call their supervisors or higher status people only by their first name. However, most of them said that now they are used to the new patterns and behave the same as Swedes. Gradually they started to call higher status by their first names, and without titles. Some may still feel shy, and just whisper the name, but others feel totally ok and do not think about it anymore. They now call their supervisor and other people with their first names.

#### *Hierarchy in teacher-student relationship:*

Different aspects of employing the rules of hierarchy are seen in Persian culture and it is not only bounded to addressing and ways of calling, talking or writing. Hierarchy in teacher-student relationship is expected and employed by Iranian students.

*“Whenever I want to go to laboratory with my supervisor, when we are at an entrance or a door, I stand and wait for him to pass first. I feel that my supervisor know that I do this out of respect and because he is my supervisor and also older than me. My supervisor has lived and studied many years abroad. He is Swedish, and he is familiar with many different cultures, so this makes our relation very comfortable and easy.” 3*

Iranians are very careful about the etiquette in the communication and relations. They are always very careful to avoid bothering someone with sayings and doings. Respecting older people and higher status is a core cultural value of Persians. For example as explained by the interviewees, it is considered disrespect in Iran when you sit down, while the older/higher statues person is standing up. It is also impolite, if at an entrance you pass first without waiting and offering to others, especially to older and higher statues people to pass. Also it is regarded as an offence if you disagree with higher statues/older in a direct language.

*“Still now, after several years, I am attached to hierarchy rules which I employed in Iran. For example when me and my supervisor are passing a door, I always stand and wait for him to pass first. Or when I was sitting in my room doing my work, and my supervisor entered, I used to stand up and talk to him while he is standing. After years, when I noticed that other students may sit while their teacher is standing, or even the students may sit on the desk, I started to do the same and now when my supervisor enters I don’t stand up.” 9*

*“When I was doing my master studies here, once I was sitting on a chair in the exam hall, and then I had to ask a question from the professor. He came and sat beside me on the floor, on his knees. I was so shy that I am sitting on the chair, but my professor is sitting on his knees on the floor. Several times I offered him to give my chair to him, but he said no it is okay, tell me your question.”1*

Due to the different student-teacher communication patterns and attitudes in Iran and Sweden, and the fact that students behave respectfully (i.e. in the same manner people act toward higher statues and more powerful) toward teachers and professors in Iran, Iranian PhD students are surprised when they observe students easy, relaxed behavior toward their teachers.

*“I was very surprised when I saw that students here in Sweden eat in the class. This is regarded as disrespect to the class and teacher in Iran, but here it is very normal. And I like this, I wish I could eat or drink something when I needed, at class. Then I did not have to wait a long time to be able to go out and get something. Even I could be more focused I were allowed to eat in class.”10*

Hierarchy is observed in the behaviors of Iranian PhD students toward their supervisors and higher statues people. Hierarchy based behaviors are seen in different situations. However many of the interviewees said that now they are not attached to behaving based on the rules of hierarchy, and now their attitude toward others is the same as swedes.

### **Collectivist, Connectedness and intimacy:**

Persian culture has a dominant collectivistic characteristic; people tend to belong to circles and groups of family, friend, colleagues, neighbors and other groups. Having good relationship with the people around them is very important for them. People mostly have a lot of kinfolk, and a lot of social interactions. Iranians visit relatives and friends regularly. Persians have tendency to communicate and maintain good relationships with people, and they avoid to be out of the group or society, or to be alone.

*“In our division, we have weekly gatherings with all the staff, and every week one person brings cake. I really like these gatherings and the fun moments we spend with the staff and talk about different interesting topics. These friendly conversations and nice moments with other employees make me feel good and help me do my work in the best way” 2*

*“I have an awesome supervisor; I think he is one of the best. We are like friends; I even talk to him about my personal life, I talk to him about football, about books, movies and we have many mutual interests. My supervisor helps and supports me in my research and studies a lot. At the university I feel safe and in peace.” 3*

*“One of my friends has an American supervisor; they go out together with the rest of PhD students a lot. I think it is good to know your colleagues more and be friend with them. In this peaceful environment that employees understand each other better, they can help one another and I am sure this will contribute to better work output.” 6*

Many of the interviewees asserted that to be “in-group” is very important for them; they believed that having a good relationship and communication with their supervisors and the staff is totally important and impacting on their career and studies. All of them agreed upon the fact that having good relationship with their supervisors is completely significant, and it absolutely helps them improve academically.

*“The good and friendly communication between us makes a very positive environment. We talk, and share our opinions and benefit from different ideas and findings. I can't say how much this is good for me, both academically and socially. I feel safe and supported in this environment. Besides the academic discussions, we talk about current social/personal events and some interesting topics. Working and interacting in this environment impacts positively on my studies and help me improve academically and socially.” 3*

*Fortunately I have a great supervisor. I felt very close to him, and I shared many events of my personal life with him. In the first months of my entrance to Sweden, he was like a father for me, and helped me a lot! The department secretary helped me a lot; they searched for house for me. My supervisor gave me a Västtrafik card.” 9*

Interviewees believed that good communication between them and the supervisors, as well as friendly environment in the division, strongly impacts on their academic improvement. According to Iranian PhD students good relationship with the supervisor helps them facilitate their academic growth. They believe that a friendly environment and with mutual understandings is totally impacting of their academic improvement.

As opposite to the collectivistic characteristic of Persian culture, Swedes have individualistic culture; independency and personal privacy are significant criteria of this culture. Personal values and goals are much more important than being considered “in-group”. Individuals in a group or society are not strongly linked or related. Participants mentioned some of their experiences regarding this criterion.

*“Sometimes I feel that I am ignored...For example in Iran, when you are in a place that there are several people, usually they will say hi to each other and start to talk. But here people sometimes even do not look at each other, and do not start chatting or talking. It has happened to me to go out with a group of people, but the next day, they don’t look friendly. Sometimes I am confused and I really don’t know how to behave. Because according to the culture I have grown up with, I should say hi and have a warm greeting to people around me whom I know; including my classmates, colleagues, and companions. 5*

*“...It was always hard for me to find Swedish friends, I mean I know a few Swedish friends, but I like to have intimate Swedish friends, friends forever.” 8*

*“We care about “not to hurt others” in a different way than Swedes. We think in our minds: “If I say/do so, maybe she will get offended? How will she perceive what I do/say?” But I think Swedish people care about “not to hurt others” in another way. They are very sensitive about the public-personal issues. They care much about the privacy of others, I think here in Sweden, having respect to others mean not to interfere in what they are doing and not to enter into their privacy and personal life. 11*

As discussed by the interviewees they experienced the individualistic spirit of Swedish culture. Swedes individualistic characters and the fact that they value privacy a lot, is different from collectivistic characteristic of Persian culture, in which people tend to be together and talk. When people of different cultures interact, lack of knowledge about the other participant’s culture and values, may lead to misunderstandings to both parts. Furthermore, Iranian doctoral students mentioned that good relationship with supervisors and staff strongly impacts on their academic improvement and social growth in Sweden.

### **Uncertainty avoidance**

Persian culture has a rather high uncertainty avoidance characteristic. This is also visible in the intercultural experiences of the Iranian PhD students. They feel uncomfortable in the situations and conditions which are unfamiliar and strange to them. They feel stressed and uneasy when they don’t know how to behave or what are the patterns and norms of a specific environment. They tend to behave in a pre-structured frame. Changing and putting away the values and routine might be hard at first, but Iranians adapt and get in harmony with the environment around them, this takes time based on different personalities.

*“Sometimes when we are sitting with the staff, it happens that I want to talk about something, but I think to myself; is it good or bad? Maybe they’ll get offended if I say so? Then I preferred to be silent since I didn’t know how my words will be perceived. 8*

*“We should put away our personal safety area we have raised with and is familiar for us, and step into the new world of unfamiliarity and new unrecognized things. It is hard.” 6*

*“When I first started my PhD, I preferred not to show that I don’t know something. I used to think it is bad if you don’t know. However, now I am relaxed and more comfortable, and if I don’t know something I talk to my supervisor and ask for help or guidance.” 7*

The interviewees mentioned that especially in an international environment, they think twice before they talk/act. They think about the appropriateness of their sayings/ activities. They do not perceive it proper to say/do something contrary to the patterns and values of that environment. They don’t like to be offensive and are worried about the judgment of others. When they do not know the rules and patterns, they feel stressed and would like to be aware of the norms and patterns.

### **Food schedule**

The interviewees mentioned the time differences for eating dinner and lunch in Iran. As in Iran, lunch and dinner is one or two hours later than the usual time that is for instance 12:00 at noon for lunch in Sweden.

*“First, eating lunch at 11:30 was a little weird for me. But soon I got used to it. Now I see that other Iranian PhD students also eat likes Swedes at 12:00. But I see some of my Southern European colleagues that eat at their own pattern of food timing, later at 14:00 or 15:00.” 2*

However one should not neglect the personal traits in food timing:

*“My body works with sun. I can eat my dinner when the sun has set, so in summer I should wait until 11-12 pm to be able to eat.” 11*

They asserted that now they are adapted to the food timing schedule at Sweden and do as Swedish people do. Most of the interviews said that now they don’t care and think about the food timing difference.

### **Obstacles**

The problems explained by PhD students were not of the same type. The extent and importance of each obstacle differed person to person. Some believed that entering to a totally different country and starting a new life and learning how to live here and adapting and adjusting to the new work-study environment, and balancing between personal and work life was not very easy at first.

*“I had stressful moments balancing between my studies and personal life. I had to work, study and research at the university morning to around 7 pm, and after that I wish I could exercise, read books, deal with my personal life, or even practice Swedish language, but I was too tired to be able to think of these. Even it is very common for us PhD students to study and work on papers and researches on weekends. I wanted to try to be social and enter the society, I liked to be part of the society. Even though I was here in Sweden for*

*my master studies, starting PhD studies was a new start with all its differences from master studies.” 8*

Besides, they mentioned the stresses which were imposed to them and increased the pressure they went through until adjustment. They processes of Visa and banking distracted them from focusing less stressed on their studies.

*“One of my main obstacles is the visa procedure that you have to extend your visa every year. This is very stressing for me, because due to papers, conferences, or classes abroad, you have to travel several times a year, and I am always worrying regarding my visa; when will it expire? When I should go to migrationsverket<sup>8</sup>? Will my visa be ready when I need it for my conference?” 1*

*“I did not know anything about the bank procedures abroad and here in Sweden, I did not know about the cards, account or rules of Banks. This imposed me stressful moments. Even in one travel to Stockholm I couldn't get the room which I had booked in advance, because I had a kind of bank card which had specific conditions for online bookings and I didn't know that. Still now, I do bank procedures with doubt and uncertainty.” 2*

*“In the first days, when they told me to go to bank and open an account for myself, I was like a blind person! I knew nothing about Gothenburg. I didn't know the name of the streets. With the instructions the secretary gave me, I managed to find the bank.” 9*

Obstacles that Iranian doctoral students experienced were different among them, but most of them experienced difficulty in adjustment requirements, such as doing bank and visa procedures, or getting to know how everything works here. Also in the first months of their entrance to Sweden, they had to make balance between studies and social and personal life and being adjusted in the life abroad.

### **Educational Obstacles**

Among the eleven interviewees, only two of them described a sort of conflicting situation with their supervisor/s. The rest had good relationships with their supervisors. As in Persian culture, the norm is to pay much respect to the professors and academically higher statues people, it is expected that students experience very little academic conflicts.

*“I have a supervisor who is not from Sweden, and he/she is not my main supervisor. He/she is the second supervisor. He/she mixes everything with my culture, and everything I do, says: “aha you did this, based on your culture? Aha you do like this in Iran?” Even in my academic writings, he/she told me: “aha, you write in this way, because of you culture?” I am really tired of her behavior toward me. She relates everything to Iran and Persian culture, and sees me as a Persian PhD student, not as a mere PhD student. Even once he/she told me negatively: “All Iranians want to be PhD”. She used this sentence to humiliate me.” 8*

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<sup>8</sup> Swedish Migration Board

*“Once I wrote a paper that was important to me, and I put so much effort on it. My paper got rejected. I thought that my supervisor and I would talk and discuss about it and look for solutions and improvements. I thought he will come and supports me and show me the way and says ok now this is our plan to fix the problem. But he just told me: “don’t be sad; just go and get some drinks and have a little fun”. I got hurt from his reaction and I was sad for days for my paper and the fact that my supervisor didn’t care. That paper is still put away!” 11*

The probable conflicts will also be non-visible and non-spoken due to the fact that Persians respect the hierarchy, and avoid saying negative things or talking about the conflict to the higher statues. Moreover, Persians try to be in harmony with the environment and mostly avoid conflicts. However two points should be mentioned: 1. if there really exist some problems it is also probable that the interviews don’t mention it, due to the politeness and etiquette or “*ta’arof*”. 2. Personal traits impact on this strategy; encountering conflicts or choosing to talk or not to talk about the conflicts may differ from a person to a person.

### **The way of coping with obstacles**

All the interviewees answered that when they encounter new routines and pattern they try to learn it and be like others and do as others do. It seems that they desire to be part of the environment they are working studying and living. Most of them said that they learn the rules and patterns by observation and noticing how the society does in different situations. The next step to deal with the new situations was to ask their Iranian colleagues how the patterns work in Sweden. Finally, some mentioned that they may ask the Swedish colleagues about the rules and order, and three of them said they talk to their supervisors due to the friendly relationship they have and feel relaxed and easy to ask them about the Swedish norms, rules and patterns. They have learned to talk about their problems and obstacles. Three other interviewees said that they put away their own norms, values and patterns in a Swedish environment.

*“Fortunately there were many Iranian PhD students in my department, when I had questions or needed help, I asked them for guidance. Of course, sometimes I talked to my supervisor and asked him to help/guide me about some daily/personal problems.” 9*

*“First, I completely preferred to ask about the, patterns and issues from other Iranian PhDs, and they guided me very well. Gradually, after a year and so I started to ask about different things from my Swedish friends or colleagues.” 7*

*“There is an Iranian students association here that is organized by Iranian students, and they help each other and specially the new comers, this organization had some gatherings for master students, and gave them PDFs consisted of important and necessary initial information about different needs and things we should know about. I learned a lot from my co-nationals. Secondly, I learned by observing what others do. I never asked questions about what I didn’t know. I didn’t like to show that I don’t know something. 11*

As discussed below, the second major attitude toward getting to know the patterns and coping with obstacles is to observe others. The interviewees said that they try to be in balance and in harmony with the environment they are in. they prefer to learn the patterns by observing. The



next trend to cope with the problems, and learn the patterns and norms is by asking other Swedish/international staff.

*“I tried to learn the patterns just by observing. I am not that kind of person to ask questions. I didn’t ask questions about the culture or patterns; I just observed and tried to learn.” 8*

*“Since I was so much happy about being accepted as a PhD student in Sweden, I didn’t notice the problems or difficulties at first months. Even later, if problems happened or I was not happy about something, I tried my best to adapt to situations and deal with problems calmly and peacefully. Because, being a PhD at Chalmers, and conducting research here was/is so important for me, I ignore if there are problems, and I try to be in harmony with the environment and focus on my goal that is to do my best in studies and researches.” 6*

*“I try very much to adapt and adjust myself to the environment, and be the same as others, do what others do, and be within the group, and be like other members.” 10*

In order to cope with differences and obstacles, three of the interviewees mentioned that they put away the Persian values and norms they have learned, and adopt patterns and norms of the environment they are in.

*“One thing that you see and feel in Iran, it is that you may do many things for your friend. You may not want something, because your friend wants that. Or you may do something that is good and advantageous for your friend, but doesn’t have any benefit for you, or even you have to put much effort (energy/money) for that thing because of your friend. But here in Sweden, after these years, I could not feel this, or maybe I have not found someone with these characteristics. So I chose to be as others, and not sacrifice myself or my interests for the benefits of others. I am trying to be like others!” 1*

*“...Now I have learned that every society had its own ups and downs. However, in a Swedish environment, I try to behave completely like a Swede” 5*

Three of the interviewees said that now they have learned to talk about their problems and ask for help and solution:

*“My supervisor told me you should tell me about the problems you may encounter at the University. In Iran, even if we had concerns or problems with some of the staff, we wouldn’t say even one word. It was not the norm to complain from superiors or complain at all.” 6*

*“Here in Sweden, they like you to go and talk about your issues/problems. I noticed that in the department meetings, I am always silent when comes the time they ask if someone has problems or critics. I felt they don’t like it when you say everything is okay and I have no problem and concern at all. They like you to be realistic and frank. So I am trying to talk about my problems or concerns.” 5*

One interviewee mentioned that he started to make himself/herself stronger and more knowledgeable about the Swedish society and culture by reading and searching. He started to get more experiences and involve in Swedish style of living in order to be fit in the Swedish society.

*“In the beginning days of my PhD, I went out with the staff to lunch. There, people started to talk about their enthusiastic experiences; they had many different fun experiences to talk about. For example one of my colleagues was talking about his surfing experience, one talked about how he runs and bikes kilometers... Their interests were not just limited to work or studies. I chose to be silent from the very first moment. I could not talk. I didn't have fantastic experiences. Though I was good in some fields, I felt that it wouldn't be interesting for them. I am not a shy or quiet person, and I even might be considered talkative when I am with Iranians... After a while, I learned to increase my information in some other fields that would be of interest for me and others, and tried to talk about them.” 11*

As presented in the explanations of the interviewees, Iranian PhD students adopt several ways in order to overcome the difficulties of entering to a new environment. Mostly, they ask their co-nationals about the Swedish patterns, values, rules and orders. As asserted by most of them, they do not like to ask others (non-Iranians) about the patterns, values and cultural attitudes a lot. They rather prefer to observe and distinguish the norms by looking what and how others behave. However, gradually they may begin to ask non Iranians about the patterns and rules. Some of them decided to talk about their needs or problems to the people responsible. Some tried to make themselves stronger by both trying to defeat their weaknesses or promoting their general information or experiences.

### **Impacts of Swedish Language on academic improvement**

Based on the differences in groups, divisions and departments PhD students were studying, I got various answers. The more international the division, the less need for learning Swedish language was felt. Also many of them mentioned as the literature and scientific terms are in English, it is better to talk in English when discussing scientifically. First, the quotes of those who believed learning Swedish language does not play role in academic improvement are presented. In the following pages I present quotes of those who believed Swedish language would absolutely help academic growth and improvement. Then comments regarding the total impact of learning Swedish language on socialization, integration and adjustment to the society are presented.

*“No! Because the technical terms we use are all in English, and our department has many internationals, so from the academic point of view I don't think that knowing Swedish language could improve my academic growth”. 1*

*“Learning Swedish is very important for social interaction. However, academically it is not important I think, though most of the staff in my department is Swedish. But everything is organized and held in English. But of course I know that people naturally prefer to talk in their mother tongue in fika, and sometimes I feel shy because I think maybe I bother them when I am sitting there and they have to talk in English”. 4*

In the other hand, three people believed that being able to communicate in Swedish is very important and effective in academic progress and improvement.

*“Learning Swedish language is very important for academic improvement. Our division has a Swedish spirit and most of the staff is Swedish. Also the working language of the companies which are collaborating with our department is Swedish. Some of them mentioned that.” 11*

Two people believed that when you are good in Swedish language and can communicate with the Swedish society, you feel more connectedness and you even find more friends and opportunities, it will increase your self-confidence and indirectly it will impact on your studies and academic improvement:

*“I think that learning Swedish language will 100% positively impacts on your academic improvement... learning Swedish will influence on your social/personal life, and then you’ll feel better, and when you feel good, you study/work better.” 8*

To sum up the explanations of the interviewees it can be said that some believed that Swedish language proficiency is not necessary for academic improvement and integration, some believed it is very important for academic improvement, the last group believed that thought Swedish language proficiency does not impact on academic improvement directly, but by affecting the social interactions and improving one’s self-confidence, it can impact on the academic improvement indirectly. Two of them mentioned that first they studied enthusiastically to learn Swedish language, but they could not focus on it. One should practice a lot while learning Swedish, and should be focused. They cannot be focused on Swedish studies, because as soon as they leave the Swedish class or Swedish practice, they start to think and write in English or Persian. “My papers and my researches have filled my mind, and I can’t find spaces for Swedish learning”. They cannot both be concentrated on PhD studies, research and teaching plus personal life and also learning Swedish.

### **Swedish; as a mandatory course?**

Most of the interviewees believed that they were too concentrated on studying, reading papers, doing projects, conducting research, and submitting to journals, that they hardly could find free spaces to study Swedish language. Therefore, they believed mandatory Swedish course will not be helpful, since as they leave the Swedish class, they will read and write in English that is related to their researches.

*“No, because we don’t have enough time to be totally focused on Swedish studying. We have many deadlines for different conferences, journals and so on. We have to teach and I usually don’t have enough time to do something else. In this situation, despite I really like to learn Swedish, it is not my priority since I have a big amount of studies to deal with. However, I feel it is my own fault, and I blame myself for this.” 7*

One of the interviewees believed that credited Swedish course would be very helpful. Another PhD student said if Chalmers hold elective credited Swedish course, she would chose to learn Swedish among other elective courses.

*“I believe if from the very first beginning we took mandatory and credited Swedish courses it would have been great.” 8*

To sum up the answers, it can be concluded that the majority of Iranian doctoral students thought that mandatory Swedish course is not a good idea. Though, all of them wished to be proficient at Swedish one day.

### **Impacts of Swedish Language on social integration**

Of course, all of them believed that learning Swedish language is a must for socialization and integration to the Swedish culture and society. All of the interviewees were sure that for a complete integration to the Swedish culture and society one must know Swedish language. Despite of the fact that in their opinion Swedish language was not important for academic reasons or even interactions at the university, but all them totally agreed upon the fact that Swedish is compulsory for stepping into the Swedish culture, Swedish society, and Swedish way of thinking and life. They believed that if you want to be part of Sweden, you should think Swedish. To be aware of the ongoing events in Sweden, to grasp the Swedish core cultural patterns, to be able to watch TV and radio programs, to be able to read best sellers and newspapers, to be able to attend the local theater or operas, and to be able to interact with swedes in ceremonies, parties and traditional events, and to be able to feel home in Sweden, you must learn Swedish language.

*“I must learn Swedish proficiently to be able to at least read what I would like to know about Swedish culture and traditions or issues in Swedish. I like to go deep into the Swedish family, to feel Swedish families, Swedish values, how they look at life, how they perceive each other, how they raise children.” 6*

*“... And now I really feel that I am out of the society, because I can't speak Swedish. I feel I am totally strange with what is going on out of the university.” 7*

*“When I came here, I thought that I have come to a different world, I taught that here people don't backbite. After I learnt Swedish, I could hear several backbites and I was happy of it. Of course not for backbite, but for the feeling I had; I felt aha so we were the same. I felt that we are humans, we are all the same nature, and it might happen in our life that we backbite! Before that I thought Swedes do not backbite.” 1*

Most of the interviewees believed that if they knew Swedish, and were aware of the cultural/social/ ongoing events and patterns, Sweden news and contemporary issues, and knew what Swedish society talk about daily, they would felt more integrated and eventually had better feelings of adjustment. Moreover two of the interviewees talked about several experiences in which they could hear people talk in Swedish, and as they knew some Swedish they could understand and then found out the same cultural patterns are at work among Iranian and swedes, for example they could hear a mother talking about her day to her daughter the same as in Iran. Or they heard some children talking about topics, the same as Iranian kids. The ability to understand Swedish language helped them discover the similarities among people of different cultures, and it helped them feel more integrated and close to Swedes.

*“When you don’t know the native language, you’ll kind of away from the society. I mean not at work or university. But in the society, you may encounter problems. Now, because I have learned some Swedish and I hear what people say in different places, I got really excited! I say to myself: “aha, so the Swedish people are just like me. We all are the same. Time passes, and more and more I feel closer to the Swedish culture and Swedish people, and in this process, knowing Swedish language helps me significantly.” I*

*“When I hear Swedish people talking on the phone, I feel so much excited, because I figure out wow swedes are just like us! As my mother talks on phone about her daily life, and for example said I went shopping today and bought this and that... they do this the same, they talk about daily life and issues. 5*

All the interviewees believed that knowing Swedish language absolutely contributes to promote social integration and adjustment into the Swedish society and culture. As discussed above, ability to communicate in Swedish language helps them be aware of ongoing social, cultural and daily issues in the Swedish society, as well as helping them to live in Sweden as a swede lives.

#### **What you wish to add/change for better academic/social adjustment of PhD students?**

The interviewees mentioned some experiences which helped them progress socially and academically and made their integration to the new environment easier and faster. They also explained about ideas which can be employed for helping the new comers to adjust faster and undergo less pressure and consequently be able to focus on studies and their career more properly.

*“I heard that in Stockholm, there are Swedish classes held within the department regularly and everyone attends. I know that there are some classes here, but they are not effective, and just a few people attend them. I think with the better organization of the Swedish classes within departments, more international PhD students will be encouraged to take part in classes regularly.” I*

More disciplined and high quality Swedish language classes being held inside the University was also one of their suggestions. One of the PhD students said that Chalmers has provided him with two levels of Swedish classes that were good, but after that they said we don’t have more than basic level classes.

*“...In our weekly meeting in the division, they said they want to get a new PhD student from South. None of the 14 people present at the meeting knew how internationals can receive personnummer<sup>9</sup>. I told them about the issues concerning personal number that the fact people may not get Swedish personal number if they stay less than 6 months. I told them if the new student can’t get personal number, then he/she can’t open a bank account. Then a new challenge aroused, since they needed a bank account to be able to give her/him salary. So, in my opinion if they organize a committee or council at the university, even with few people, and the university staff could go and refer to them when*

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<sup>9</sup> Swedish national identification number

*they have questions, issues, or problem, it will be very helpful and time consuming. This committee can be consisting of people from Migrationsverket, Skatteverket<sup>10</sup>, kommun<sup>11</sup>, and the other organizations which are necessary for settling the new comers. Both new comers (visitors, guest lecturers, PhD students, guest professors), and Swedish staff can refer to them, when they have questions or need help and information.” 3*

Some believed that it is very good that Chalmers organize a specific committee to deal with the new international PhD students and their probable needs and questions. New comers have to do some initial routines and orders to be registered and adjusted in Sweden. Furthermore they may need to know about the visa and bank procedures, information regarding health care, driving license, insurance, housing, family members or children, and many other rules and orders in Sweden. This committee can also help the Swedish staff deal with questions they encounter regarding their prospective PhD students.

*“The university provided useful events/seminars when I started my master degree at Chalmers, there were regarding visas, bank accounts, healthcare, job and future opportunities, and some historical, cultural, social hints in Sweden. I think it is very good to provide theses information for international PhDs as well.” 4*

One of the interviews mentioned that in the beginning of his master studies Chalmers provided very good information. He forgot some of these information because they were provided in big quantities, and also because he did not know that he will need them in the following months. If the information giving seminars and sessions of asking/ answering questions take place slowly within one or two years, it will be more helpful. When they encounter problems, situations or have some questions and need to ask the specialist in that field, and then that seminar is organized in the following week/month they can go eagerly with their questions and benefit more. If Chalmers hold the same seminars about different issues for international PhDs, the students will benefit very much.

*“When I first entered Sweden, I knew nothing from European culture. I just had some ideas from what I had seen in the media. If the university provide some sessions with international PhDs and talk to them about intercultural differences and the norms and patterns here in Sweden, it would be so great. I really like to know more about Sweden, their cultures, their customs and the way of their thinking.” 5*

*“...what is shown about Iran is not a true image. Some people think we live in deserts and use camels! When I say that in many parts of Iran, it snows, or we have jungles, rivers, mountains and seas, they get surprised! Once I said I used to go mountain climbing, they were shocked and asked: Are girls allowed to go mountain climbing. A few people knew that Iranians pay much attention to education, and have higher percentage of female university students than male students in Iran. A few people know there are big/luxury houses and modern lives in Iran. I sometimes feel frustrated when people ask*

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<sup>10</sup> “Swedish Tax Agency”: a government agency which is responsible for national tax collection as well as administering the population registration.

<sup>11</sup> Sveriges kommuner: The municipalities of Sweden

*me: Do people have internet or Skype in Iran?! They have an ambiguous picture of Iran. I really feel it is needed to show the real Iran, the Persian culture and families.”10*

Three of the PhD students wanted to present the Iran and Persian culture and customs to employees and get them familiar with Persian values, norms and behaviors, for mutual understandings and better intercultural communication.

*“In USA, top universities including Berkeley and Stanford universities have special kinds of programs for the many numbers of researchers/PhDs/Professors who go there for visiting and study. In the first of every month they have programs or tours that organize for guests and make them familiar with for example processes of getting driving license, opening bank accounts, and many other issues that they might encounter within their stay( including one or several months) in USA. I think if at Chalmers some slimier programs be organized for the new comers, it will make the adjustment into the society easier, and students can be more relax and focus on their studies.” 9*

Some of them mentioned that it is so good that Chalmers organize intercultural communication classes or seminars both for international and Swedish staff. Explaining about the cultural patterns, behaviors and expectations in Sweden, and even showing the Swedish way of communication and interaction practically by organizing mutual events with natives can be among the topics of these seminars.

*“There were two-three events a specialist in intercultural communication came and talked to us, she told us about differences and interesting patterns and attitudes in different cultures. It was good, but I think for a better and more effective knowledge about cultural differences, we should experience them in reality and in practice. I think if more of these events take place, and they provide us with chances to interact with Swedish citizen practically it would be so good. I’ll admire if they help us, and provide with opportunities to be able to go the center of the society and feel the core cultural norms.” 11*

One interviewee believed that for academic and social improvement, it is he/she that should change, and try to make balance between his/her tasks:

*“I think all the external things are okay and good. I have a good relationship with my supervisor. I think it is me who should change, I think I expect myself much; I expect myself to do different things at the same time. I expect myself to be good in different things, and this impose me pressure. 7*

The suggestions and recommendations of the interviewees are categorized and summarized in the recommendation part at the end of the thesis.

### **Culture-related differences in educational systems/ teaching method**

Most of the interviewees believed that educational systems, rules, and patterns are different between Iran and Sweden. All of them said that research facilities and opportunities are very strong in Sweden and the quality of researches/projects is very good. The courses and conferences they take part are helpful and keeps them internationally linked with the scientists

around the word. However, they believed that the courses they passed in their master/bachelor programs in Iran were harder, deeper, and more detailed.

*“I think here in Sweden, everything is more organized. You see discipline and order in everything. I believe that this order and discipline make the communication easier and more convenient; you know how you should behave and what you should expect from others.” 7*

*“I really like that most people behave based on the rules and orders. When rules are clear and specified, then there is no disorder, irregularity. This make me feel safe, when I know that everything will proceed based on the rules and orders.” 9*

Interviewees believed that everything is pre-scheduled here in Sweden, and works go on based on disciplines, rules and orders. Also they said that in Sweden, universities encourage students to be actively engage in social sphere, and communicate and socialize with people.

*“I didn’t know that being social is considered very important here. I noticed that the real goal of many activities is socialization and contacting people. My supervisor said: “The reason you go to a conference is not just to present your paper or listen to others lectures. You should try to contact to other people, you should communicate and socialize with them.” 4*

They believed that educational system of Iran and Sweden are different. Sweden has better and stronger facilities for conducting researches and projects. Sweden provides you to collaborate and be in touch with scientist all over the world, and you can keep updated with the modern science. However, interviewees believed that course literature was harder and more detailed in Iran.

*“Sweden and Iran educational system are different. I believe that the research system in Sweden is very stronger than Iran. Sweden has strong research centers. Research in Iran is weakly supported. However, I think that the courses we took in Iran were harder and we had to study days and night. The course literature was deeper and more detailed.” 10*

*“Scientific level of the courses I passed in Iran was higher, and courses were harder, and we studied huge amounts of detailed literature. When I noticed that here courses and the literature are easier I was a little surprised, However, I believe that the research are much more active and better in Sweden.” 8*

Some of the interviewees mentioned that in Iran, the bases of the courses were usually theoretical, and we had a few group works, but here in Sweden students benefit from the many group projects and team works scheduled by the department. When the theoretical literature and topics are employed practically in projects, laboratories and experiments, they stick in mind for a longer time, than just reading the text of books and memorizing the formulas or hypothesizes.”



*“Though, courses here are not as harder as courses we passed in Iran, but I believe that I learned more here in Sweden, due to practical assignments and the need to employ what you have learned practically and in the projects.” 10*

Furthermore they referred to the fact that Iranian students tend to ask not a lot of questions. They were happy about the working evaluation system in Sweden, and that the students’ voice can be heard. One of the interviewees told that he/she had difficulties in doing course tasks and materials only in a short period of time (within a quarter), and she wished for a longer amount of time in a quarter.

*“The system of course evaluating is so good here both for the students and me as a teacher when I get feedbacks...” 7*

*“In Iran if students don’t understand something in the class; they may just ask two/three questions... but here in Sweden students ask as many questions as to be able to understand what the teacher said. We (Iranians) have not learned to ask if we do not understand or if we do not agree.” 10*

Two of the interviewees explained about the culture related differences they experienced in teaching methods. They mentioned that Swedes tend to accomplish works one-by-one i.e.; they don’t do a lot of different tasks at the same time. They complete one task in its time, and after that work is done, they start another and then the other task. Below, their experiences are presented:

*“I used to write on the board and talk and explain the topic, simultaneously. But, then I distinguished that it is not the norm in Sweden. You should not do different things at the same time. You should teach and explain one after another and based on pattern. In Iran we are used to do several tasks at the same, but here students don’t like that. I should first write for them, then with face to face communication, explain the course for them.” 8*

*“Before the students come to the class, I draw the related shapes on the board. Later my supervisor told me that students told please don’t draw the shapes or charts on the board before we come to class. When we enter the class and see the complicated pictures we feel stressed! Draw them in front of us!”*

There are some differences in the teaching methods, educational system and course material between Iran and Sweden. In Sweden, there are more group works, practical assignments, and experiments, while in Iran the courses are conducted mostly based on the individual studies, and theoretical practices. Interviewees believed that practical practices make the newly learned topics more understandable, as well as making it stick in the mind for a longer time. Swedish students ask questions until they completely understand and agree to the subject, but Iranian students tend to ask fewer questions; after two or three times, they will stop asking or discussing with the teacher. In Iran educational material may be presented simultaneously and together, but in Sweden course materials should be presented one after another. And finally, according to the interviewees, study and research facilities and opportunities are very stronger

than Iran, and educational system is student centered. However, they believe that the quantities of course-literature and study material were more and also they were harder in Iran.

### **Personal traits:**

Furthermore, some of the interviewees emphasized that the way we see, judge and perceive others, is dependent on our characteristics, backgrounds, and inner feelings or thoughts. Though there are generalizations related to cultures, but it might not be correct for every individuals of that culture.

*“In my opinion we can’t say that the whole Iranians are like this and the whole swedes are like that. Though I believe in some generalizations and I accept that there are many culture specific characteristics.” 11*

Below two different personal traits (in relation to the power-distance criterion of Persian culture) are presented:

*“When my supervisor enters my room, I don’t think about that I am sitting and he is standing. Sometimes I ask him to have a seat, and he sits on the chair besides me. I mean I don’t feel that he is my supervisor and I must regard him as the president. My supervisor is like my friend, and as I told before I feel very relax and good in his presence.” 3*

*“In my first year, I was stressful when I talked to my supervisor. I couldn’t talk properly. I was so shy and also considered him as a very superior person. I thought I was a little girl, and he is the most important person. When he entered to my room, I used to get and stand until he was in my room. Now I am better. I mean today I feel and behave totally okay with my supervisor, but still there are some conditions of uncertainty that I don’t know how to act.” 6*

As observed in the above quotes, two Iranian PhD students behave totally different in the presence of their supervisor; one is completely calm, self-confident, and relaxed, while another one is worried and stressed. Therefore, differences between people of the same nationality and culture exist, and are dependent on the personal characteristics and traits.

### **Summary of the results from interviews**

In the interviews several themes are discussed. In this part, the summary of the results are presented.

Culture shock: All the interviewees have experienced culture shock. The main causes can be categorized to four categories; (1) Some of them strongly felt the sudden absence of Persian cultural patterns, familiar values, signs, symbols, attitudes, and customs (2)The other group missed their parents, families and the familiar environment. These two reasons (1 and 2) imposed them feelings of homesickness, depression, and loneliness. (3) The third group felt they are insufficient in a Swedish society, because they were unaware of social and cultural attitudes, patterns, and values. They did not know how everything is working in Sweden. (4) And the last minor group experienced low self-confidence , and low self-estimation, due to the fact that from an environment in which they were admired due to their matureness in

studies and other criteria, they came to a new different environment in which they had lack of knowledge about many social, cultural, political, daily issues.

Disintegration: Some of the interviewees said that in first months/years of their coming to Sweden, they chose to be silent, because they were unaware of the cultural, social and daily topics in Sweden. They did not know what is interesting to talk about, or what the current Swedish issues are. They were unaware of the social interaction patterns and rules; they did not know what are the accepted topics, and also manners of behavior. Therefore in the “crisis” stage of culture shock period, they were disintegrated from the society.

Adaptation/Mastery: The results strongly show the PhD students’ gradual adaption, mastery or matureness over the obstacles. After a period of crisis, they *gradually* got adapted and adjusted to the environment and now they feel okay. They learned what and how to behave, or at least they got used to differences. They learned the new patterns, values, attitudes, rules, and in one world; Swedish “society”. Those who have passed the crisis stage and are now completely in “mastery” stage, feel they are integrated very well, both socially and academically. They feel they are part of the society. In the “Mastery” stage, most of the patterns, rules, orders, behaviors are familiar for them.

Time Factor: Being very engaged in studies, research and work at the university imposed them the lengthier culture shock and period of unawareness of the Swedish culture and Swedish society. Their integration into the Swedish society was very slow.

Greeting Patterns: Greeting patterns of Iranians and Swedes are different, each culture has special ways of greetings, and lack of intercultural knowledge may lead to misunderstandings. Not employing the patterns of greeting in Persian culture, may imply impoliteness or dislike. Ta’arof: ta’arof, a core cultural value in Iran, is strongly conducted among Persians. Employing ta’arof implies politeness, goodness, humbleness, respect and is considered a friendly behavior. However, Iranian PhD students said that in an international setting, they have learned not to act based on ta’arof, since it is not understood or valued. Moreover, they have learned not to expect ta’arof from others.

Gender: The results show that there are strong male-female role distinctions in Iran. There are specific sorts of behavioral expectations both from males and females. Therefore, when Iranians enter to new cultures with different norms and values, it takes time for them to be adapted to the new environment and new values and expectations. However, it should be added that even this strong male-female role distinction characteristic of Persian culture is different among different families and personalities in Iran. There are people with less gender role distinctions characteristics in their attitudes and norms.

Hierarchy/ Power-distance: One of the main differences between Swedish and Persian culture is the distinction between different social statuses and age. In Iran, people pay much value and respect to the older people, and consider them as wise and well-experienced. Also when a person is higher in statues and position, people treat him very respectfully and often submissively. Hierarchy is observed in the behaviors of Iranian PhD students toward their supervisors and higher statues people. Hierarchy based behaviors are seen in different

situations. The results show that it was inappropriate or improper for the participants to call their supervisors or higher status people only by their first name. However, the majority gradually adapted to the new environment and they are used to the new patterns and behave the same as Swedes.

Collectivist, Connectedness and intimacy: The results signify the collectivistic characteristics of Persian culture versus individualistic characteristic of Swedish culture. The results also suggest that good relationship and closeness to the supervisor and staff impacts positively on the academic improvement of Iranian PhD students.

Uncertainty avoidance: Iranian PhD students avoid uncertainty. They do not perceive it proper to say/do something contrary to the patterns and values of that environment. They do not like to be offensive and are worried about the judgment of others. When they do not know the rules and patterns, they feel stressed and would like to be aware of the norms and patterns.

Obstacles: Results show that though Iranian doctoral students experiences were different among, but most of them experienced difficulty in adjustment requirements, such as doing bank and visa procedures, or getting to know how everything works here. Also in the first months of their entrance to Sweden, they had to make balance between studies and social and personal life and being adjusted in the life abroad.

Educational Obstacles: Most of the interviewees believed in no educational obstacles, and they mentioned their good relationships with their supervisors. Only 2/11 talked about a few problems. The probable conflicts will also be non-visible and non-spoken due to the fact that Persians respect the hierarchy, and avoid saying negative things or talking about the conflict to the higher status. Moreover, Persians try to be in harmony with the environment, be polite, and mostly avoid conflicts.

Food schedule: There are differences in time schedule for lunch and dinner between Iran and Sweden. However, the interviewees asserted that it is not important for them, and now they have used to the Swedish time schedule.

Ways of coping with obstacles: Results show that Iranian PhD students adopt several ways in order to overcome the difficulties of entering to a new environment. Mostly, they ask their co-nationals about the Swedish patterns, values, rules and orders. As asserted by most of them, they do not like to ask others (non-Iranians) about the patterns, values and cultural attitudes a lot. They rather prefer to observe and distinguish the norms by looking what and how others behave. However, gradually they may begin to ask non Iranian about the patterns and rules. Some of them decided to talk about their needs or problems to the people responsible. Some tried to make themselves stronger by both trying to defeat their weaknesses or promoting their general information or experiences.

Impacts of Swedish Language on academic improvement: Some of the interviews believed that Swedish language proficiency is not necessary for academic improvement and integration, some believed it is very important for academic improvement, the last group believed that thought Swedish language proficiency does not impact on academic

improvement directly, but by affecting the social interactions and improving one's self-confidence, it can impact on the academic improvement indirectly.

Swedish; as a mandatory course? The majority of Iranian doctoral students thought that mandatory Swedish course is not a good idea. Though, all of them wished to be proficient at Swedish one day.

Impacts of Swedish Language on social integration: All the interviewees believed that knowing Swedish language absolutely contributes to promote social integration and adjustment into the Swedish society and culture. The ability to communicate in Swedish language helps them be aware of ongoing social, cultural and daily issues in the Swedish society, as well as helping them to live in Sweden as a swede lives.

What you wish to add/change for better academic/social adjustment of PhD students? The interviewees discussed several suggestions for better academic and social adjustment. The suggestions and recommendations of the interviewees are categorized and summarized in the recommendation part at the end of the thesis (p.63).

Culture-related differences in educational systems/ teaching method: There are some differences in the teaching methods, educational system and course material between Iran and Sweden. Swedish students ask questions until they completely understand and agree to the subject, but Iranian students tend to ask fewer questions. In Iran educational material may be presented simultaneously and together, but in Sweden course materials should be presented one after another. Study and research facilities and opportunities in Sweden are very stronger than Iran, and educational system is student centered. However, interviewees believe that the quantities of course-literature and study material were more and also they were harder in Iran.

Personal traits:

Though there are generalizations related to cultures, there are differences between people of the same nationality and culture that are dependent on the personal characteristics and traits

## Discussion:

In this thesis the culture related experiences of Iranian doctoral students in Sweden are studied in terms of intercultural communication. The different cultural dimensions of Persian and Swedish culture are discussed. The social and academic integration of Iranian doctoral students and their probable obstacles are studied, as well as their manner of confrontation and coping with the adjustment process in a new environment. The culture shock period, its different stages, and its impacts on the integration of the subjects are analyzed. In the discussion section, the results of the study are discussed in relation to the theories as well as to the terms presented in the literature Review.

### Swedish vs. Persian culture

According to the differences between the power distance dimension discussed by Hofstede(1986) there are differences in how people call or address different people with different hierarchical level and power in Iran. Iranians use titles and plural form of pronouns when addressing a more powerful or older person, while in Sweden people call the first names of others without titles. The findings of this study is compatible with Allwood (2009) discussions that believes there are differences in different cultures in the way of addressing people, and for instance addressing more powerful people without their family name or title is considered disrespect in some cultures, while in Sweden people use first names to call each other.

The interviewees asserted that it seemed improper to them to call their supervisor by the first name or addressing him/her with singular pronouns, while they have always used titles in and plural pronouns in Iran when interacting with higher statuses people. As Hofstede(1986) discussed, there is differences in the distribution of power or “power-distance” between Swedish and Persian culture. Sweden is among countries with low power distance (31), while Iran is among the countries with rather higher power distance dimension (58). There is gap and inequality between the more powerful (wealthier, more educated, higher social statuses) and the less powerful. More powerful and older people are treated very respectfully. Even this gap and respect is presented in the way manner and word choice of less powerful toward more powerful.

Furthermore in their relationships and communication with their supervisor and higher statuses people, they were very respectful and employed the rules of hierarchy toward them. They care for what they say and do, they avoid conflicts, they are careful to behave politely and according to norm, values and etiquette. All of the interviewees were surprised by the manner of non-Iranian students toward their professors and the fact that hierarchy is not visible in student-teacher relations. 15 out of 30 participants also said that there were surprised by the behaviors of students toward professors.

Power-distance is a feature rarely visible in Swedish culture. The Iranian PhD students explained many cases in which the power-distance dimension related to Persian culture was distinguished. However some of them claimed that now they are adapted to the Swedish norms and values, and they usually do not employ the rules of hierarchy. Furthermore 15 out of 30 participants were not surprised by student’s easy attitudes and behavior toward teacher. So

personal traits are also influencing on this dimension, and it may be different between different people. Hofstede (1986) believes that in societies that there is larger power-distance in their culture, students feel less anxiety with fixed rule and regulations, and unambiguity makes them anxious and uncertain. It is also expected that they undergo educational related problems, but be shy to ask for solutions because they do not know how the cultural/social pattern in Sweden is.

Iran and Sweden are different in terms of their attitudes toward genders. Iran is many times a more masculine society than Sweden. The role distribution of men and women and expectations from male and females are distinct. While in Sweden roles of men and women overlap, and there are few pre-designed expectations of males and females. In the interviews with Iranian PhD students, females talked about their experiences and expectations which approved the theories of Hofstede (1986) regarding masculinity-femininity dimension. However this dimension is changing nowadays in Iran and among young Persian people, and also it is different based on the personalities and characteristics of different people.

The findings of this study are totally in accordance with the theories of Hofstede(1986) which categorized Persian culture as a uncertainty avoidant culture. The interviewees talked about the stressful moments when they did not know what is right/wrong to do or say, and what behavior is expected. They feel more relaxed and okay in familiar situations where the patterns and rules are pre-distinguished. 13 participants said they were afraid to say/do something and it will be considered as not polite or in contradict to social norms in Sweden, and it causes problem. 7 out of 30 participants said that sometimes they had educational related problems, but were shy to ask for solutions because they didn't know how the cultural/social pattern in Sweden is. Guanipa (1998) believes that culture shock concluded from the new environment leads the new comers to feel non efficiency of directions and not being sure what to do or how do what they require in the environment. They might not know what is consider appropriate and what is not, in the new culture. They can be shocked by the behaviors of students toward professors. Iranian students coming from a large power-distance culture believe in unequal distribution of power between professors and students.

Iranian PhD students have grown up in families and a society with collectivistic features. They care for being a part of cohesive groups and “in-group” values more than individual interests and values, and heir connection and relationships are strongly linked. Therefore when they enter the Swedish culture which contain individualistic features and emphasizes independency, privacy and self-achievements more than togetherness and group cohesiveness, they encounter cultural differences which may cause frustration and anxiety. All the interviewees believed that a good relationship with the supervisor and staff and a friendly environment, contributes to improvement in their academic adjustment and improvement. Furthermore 20 out of 30 participants experienced loose relationships and lack of intimacy with non-Iranian employees. The findings of this study is in accordance with the theories of Hofstede(1986) which categorized Persian culture as collectivistic, and Swedish culture as an individualistic culture.

## **Intercultural Communication**

Greeting patterns are different in Iran and Sweden. Due to the collectivistic characteristic of Iranian, presented by Hofstede (1986), a warm “Hi” and a little chatting is expected as friendly behavior, while if somebody does not say hi/bye or avoid engaging in conversations may imply dislike. Nonverbal communications of the two countries are also different. While in Iran people may even start talking with strangers in public/private places, Swedes with individualistic features in their culture (Baringa1999, Allwood 1999) tend to be more cautious to start an interaction and they wish to preserve distance.

The findings of this study, also suggests that in intercultural communications, and in coping with culture shock, personal traits have significant roles. Interviewees mentioned that the way they interact, cope with, judge and perceive others, is dependent on their characteristics, personalities, and inner feelings or thoughts. This is compatible with findings of Martin and Nakayama (2010) which suggest that in an intercultural interaction, besides the significance of intercultural competency of the individuals, the personalities and characteristics of both parties engaged in the interaction are important.

## **Academic/Social Adjustment & Integration**

43% of the participants believed that lack of intercultural knowledge are an obstacle for them. They don't know what are the norms, routines, patterns, and values of the society they have entered. 20 out of 30 participants said that being unaware about the contemporary cultural or social news and what are the topics people talk about daily is an obstacle for them to be able to socialize properly. Some of the interviewees believed that entering to a new environment and trying to balance between life and work was stressing at first. But gradually their socialization and integration both to the society and work environment went well.

47% believed that Swedish Language problems are the main obstacle in their way to improve socially and academically. The interviewees mentioned that they did not have time and were not focused enough to study Swedish language in the first years/months of their PhDs. Ward and Kennedy (1999) believe that competence in the host language is one of the core steps of acculturation process. All the interviewees believed that learning Swedish language strongly affects their integration to the society and improve their social adjustment. According to Ward et al (2001), if international have good language proficiency, they can interact more properly in the new society. However different interviews had different views regarding the importance on knowing Swedish language in an academic environment, since most of the communications are in English, though it is dependent to how much the department/division is international.

The findings of this study are compatible with findings of Garry et al. (2006) who believe that the students' backgrounds have influences on their adjustment to the new environment as well as their academic performances. They distinguishes several factors such as: student's gender, age, study level, self-confidence, position, talent to speak the target language, the degree of difference between the host and origin culture, and if they previously experienced cross-cultural issues or not.

The results of this study are compatible with the theories of Church (1982) Li & Gasser (2005) James & Devlin, (2001) Tinto (1975) Baker and Siryk (1999) Credé & Niehorster



(2912), who studied the environmental/ cultural/ psychological factors on the academic performances of international, and asserted that these factors have impacts on the academic performances of students.

### **Culture Shock**

When the participants and interviewees were asked to describe their experiences, they talked about a time in which they felt disappointed and uncertain. As discussed in the literature review this stage is called “crisis”, “grief” or “disintegration”. This is a time in which new comers feel insufficient or dissatisfied. 54% of the participants said that effects of immigration such as homesickness, frustration and other issues impacted on their studies to some extent, while 23% believed that culture shock had no effect on their studies and the other 23% said that culture shock strongly impacted on their academic improvement. Baker et al (1999) argues that the academic/social integration of students will affect their academic performance.

Findings of this study shows that not all people go through “Honeymoon” stage and feel very happy at first. Experiencing the honeymoon stage, and its quality and quantity is a multidimensional question. It depends highly to the psychological, emotional, motivational elements of people, as well as how they are treated when first enter to the new environment. Furthermore, the time period of experiencing honeymoon stage, or initial enthusiasm and attraction is different among people based on their characteristics and conditions. While some of the interviews said that they were very happy and enthusiastic to enter Sweden and they were ready to defeat any obstacle, some other said they were worried and uncertain about the future, and did not know what will happen next. They were thinking about how to start a new life, about probable economic problems, and about their families. So it seems that the theories which discusses “honeymoon”, are not correct for everyone, and it is personally and culturally affected. The controversial issue is that previous studies by Oberg (1960) Berger (1963) Pedersen (1994) Adler (1975) presents an initial honeymoon stage, before the crisis and grief time. Even the “U curve” and its estimated time table presented before, is not correct always and for everybody.

All the interviewees believed that after a period, they passed the crisis time and started to feel normal and okay. This period was also different among different people, and was dependent on their personal traits, their language proficiency, their interactions with nationals and how well they could adjust their work and life. All the interviewees said that gradually they leaned the new environment rules, norms, patterns and values. They believed that they progressed step by step and got adjusted and adapted. They distinguished how to act in different situations and furthermore they started to feel that now they are totally adjusted and felt home. After the “Re-integration, adjustment” level, comes the “Mastery” level according to the “U curve”, and it is in accordance with the findings of this research. The culture shock levels and its period is strongly dependent on the characteristics of the students and the conditions they have before and after entering to the new country, and it is not totally specified and the same for everyone.

There are some culture-specific distinctions between Iran and Sweden educational system. 87% of the participants believed in these differences and preferred the Swedish doctoral educational system. Due to the low power-distance and individualistic features of Swedish culture, and the democratic spirit of decision making, students undergo less pressure and hardship in the process of their studies. They communicate easily and away from constraints with the staff. They criticize or discuss their opinions freely. And if there are complications, they ask as many questions as the problem gets clear. There are also differences in teaching methods and the quality/quantity of course materials. Teaching methods and pedagogical patterns may differ from a country to a country; even European countries might have different instructional models (Kivinen & Nurmi, 2003). Zepke & Leach (2005) discuss that international students may encounter culture shock when they are confronting with the new and different teaching methods, educational patterns and attitudes of the host university.

### **Language Issues**

57% Iranian PhD students believed they do not have any English language problem at all, and only 7% claimed that they have English language problems a lot. Since mostly they have started learning English language in childhood and being proficient in English was criteria to be able to join the universities abroad, they are proficient in English language. Therefore the theories regarding problems of international students with English language proficiency are not correct for Iranian PhD students. However the case is different for Swedish language proficiency. Discussions regarding the native language proficiency in relation to the results and theories are presented in the previous page (p.56), so to avoid redundancy it is not discussed here twice.

### **How do Iranian doctoral students cope with cultural differences?**

All the 11 interviewees said that when they encounter new routines and patterns they try to learn them and to be like others and do as others do. 77% of the participants said that in coping with the cultural differences in the academic workplace, they try to learn the new rules, order and values by observing and looking what others do. They try to be flexible and do as others do in similar situations. The next method they employ to recognize the patterns and norms is to ask the other people, supervisors, and staff. They tend to deal with the new situations by asking their Iranian colleagues how the patterns work in Sweden. Finally, some mentioned that they may ask the Swedish colleagues about the rules and order, and three of them said they talk to their supervisors due to the friendly relationship they have and feel relaxed and easy to ask them about the Swedish norms, rules and patterns. They have learned to talk about their problems and obstacles. Three other interviewees said that they put away their own norms, values and patterns in a Swedish environment, and act according to that environment patterns and values. Portes and Zhou (1993) discuss that two factors impacts assimilation process: 1. how immigrants are socially perceived (biased/ unbiased). 2. Presence of co-nationals and people from of the same culture.

In coping with cultural differences in their workplace, they try to be flexible, and do what others do, by observing others behaviors and attitudes, and following the same patterns in similar situations. A study of Iranian immigrants, and other filed studies showed that about 73% of Iranian were in harmony with the new environment. Some believe that this might be

due to the collectivistic characteristic of their origin culture and their dependency on this motto: “while you are in Rome, do as Roman does” (Bastani, 2001: 35) this might be also due to the fact that Iranians seek rules and orders (uncertainty avoidance), and they find patterns mostly by observations. (hofstede, 1986)

## Conclusion:

Every individual perceives the world and other people's behaviors based on his/her culture, values, beliefs, and personal characteristics. When people of different cultures communicate and interact, they might be unaware of the other parts' culture and worldviews, and according to Allwood (1999) intercultural communication may lead to misunderstandings. In Sweden, 40% of the doctoral students at universities were internationals at 2012 (UKÄ, 2013). The second big majority of international doctoral students are Iranian PhD students, and it is expected that more Iranian students choose to pursue higher education at Swedish universities. This research answered the questions presented previously in the Research Questions section. It figured out;

- In terms of intercultural communication, what cultural differences Iranian PhD students experience at Sweden?
- How is their social and academic integration and adaptation?

Due to the cultural differences between Iran and Sweden, newcomers are confronted with several challenges. Iranians are from a collectivistic, high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, masculine, and long-term oriented culture, while Swedes are from an individualistic, low power-distance, low-uncertainty avoidance, feminine, and short-term orientation culture. Furthermore, Persian way of communication is considered rather high context and indirect. These different cultural characteristics together with many other criteria have resulted different societies, structures and life styles, as well as different norms, values, patterns, behaviors, and communication strategies in Iran and Sweden. Therefore, when Iranian doctoral students who have grown up in Iran enter Sweden, they confront with two major challenges. One is to settle down in a totally new country, and the second is to integrate and adapt to a new study-work environment which is different from what they observed and experienced before, in Iran. Iranian PhD students undergo culture shock resulted from the new social and work environment. Hofstede et al (2002) discusses that culture shock does not happen only when new comers enter in a new country or city, it also happens when people enter a new work environment and organization. (Hofstede et al, 2002:22)

Culture shock impacts socially and academically. Socially, they confront many new rules, orders, behavioral patterns, values, norms, and beliefs that might be both interesting or strange and stressing. According to what most of the interviewees believed, they lack information about Swedish culture, society and ongoing social/political/ cultural issues. Furthermore, they do not know the Swedish language that is regarded as the most important figure to enter the Swedish culture and society. They confront with situations that do not know what/how to act/say.

They have learned to respect the hierarchy and they employ rules of etiquette and "*ta'arof*" toward others, specially the highest statues. They work/study hard and may save for the sake of future achievements and pleasure. They perceive others based on the male-female prescribed role distinctions and expectations. They look for patterns, order, and rules, and avoid situations when they do not know how to behave. They might have questions/opinions, but do not assert them, being worried about others' reactions or judgment, or simply for trying

not to hurt others. Iranian PhD students are flexible, and try to adapt to the new situation and environment. Their attitude is balance-oriented and they try to be in harmony with the surroundings.

These cultural differences are also reflected in their experiences of new work-study environment. From a teacher-centered educational system, they have entered a student-centered environment. In Iran teachers/professors are regarded as more knowledgeable and therefore more powerful and higher statuses. Students should obey the hierarchy. Therefore, when Iranian students enter Sweden, where teachers are regarded in the same statuses as students, and there are a few hierarchies in the educational system, they encounter many culture differences related to power-distance criteria. Though, at first they feel shy to behave toward the higher statuses in the same way they behave others, but gradually they changes attitude toward a more Swedish behaviors and values. Furthermore, due to the collectivistic characteristic of Persian culture, they seek friendship and intimacy within the environment they are working/studying and friendly attitudes among them and the staff helps them integrate academically. Furthermore, good relationship and communications with the supervisors contributes to their academic improvement, since they feel more supported and encouraged in this environment.

First entering to a new country, environment, and work place is supposed to be enthusiastic, cheerful, and ambitious for students. However this is different among Iranian PhD students. Though, they are happy and cheerful of being accepted at high-ranked well-facilitated Swedish universities, but at the same time they confront new challenges resulted by entering to a different culture. The first months of their entrance can be regarded as both “honeymoon” and “stressful period”. They are excited about the new country and better opportunities, but at the same time they are concerned with housing issues, registrations in different organizations, visa procedures, opening bank account, financial concerns, homesickness and missing the family in Iran, as well as adjusting to the new life style, the new neighborhood and learning all the rules patterns and norms of a living in Sweden as a resident.

Based on the literature, after the initial “excitement about everything” , the so called “crisis” time occurs, a period in which Iranian PhD students are encountered with cultural differences, challenges, obstacles, and realities. Feelings of insufficiency, low self-confidence, frustration and homesickness might occur.

Though new Iranian PhD students confront challenges and obstacles that they have to cope with them, it is necessary to add that according to what the interviewees said and based on the literature, they gradually learn the norms, rules, and attitudes, and gradually they adapt to the new situations and environment. Progressively they get more experience and become aware of the sociocultural patterns, norms, and behavioral attitudes. The period of this adaptation is different among Iranian PhD students and it is dependent on some factors including: their personal traits, how much contact they have with the nationals, and Swedish language proficiency. The adaptation period starts soon after they started the PhD studies, it will continue to the point they still learn new Swedish sociocultural characteristics, but the most of

adaptation and integration happens in the first years. Lack of intercultural knowledge and differences in cultural/social patterns and norms might prevent them from more improvement both in social and academic life. Furthermore, there are some factors that affect the psychosocial adjustment of students, some of these cross cultural variables are how much contact they have with host nationals, how long they have been in the host country, how much financial support they have, and how is their housing condition (Mehdizade, 2005).

### **Recommendations/suggestions:**

As intercultural communication can be stressful, disappointing and confusing, not only the students, but also the educators should get familiar with patterns of cultural diversity and be trained how to interact in culturally diverse academic environment. (Singh 2009)

When Iranian PhD students were asked to talk about their positive experiences and suggestions for improving the social and academic integration of international PhD students, they presented some ideas they think can help new comers adjust faster and easier and therefore make “crisis” stage shorter and less stressing, in their process of adaptation to the new environment.

### **Holding Intercultural Communication Workshops:**

The interviewees explained about two/three events held by the university, in which an expert in intercultural communication explained about different attitudes and patterns of communication in some countries. The PhD students which got the opportunity to attend these events believed that the events were very interesting. They had not intercultural communication and if it can be regarded like that, before. In those events, they got some hints about the intercultural communication procedures. All of the doctoral students suggested that more and more of these events and sessions regarding intercultural communication can be very helpful and interesting. They look forward to know more about the nature of intercultural communication, its ups and down, its procedures, as well as attitudes, values and patterns of communication in different cultures.

### **A Welcome Center:**

Based on the experiences of Iranian PhD students; organizing a center, a group, or a board to help international doctoral students in their process of adjustment and integration is suggested. This board can be consisting of professionals from some organizations to deal with new initial needs of international doctoral students. The board can Introduce Sweden to the new comers. In a professional manner the board can introduce them important rules and orders. For instance, how to find a house, how to register *personnummer* at *Skatteverket*, how to extend visa, how to do bank procedures, how to get driving license, how to seek help in case of emergency, as well as helping them in adjusting to the new town and guiding them toward health clinics, leisure time activities, shopping centers, libraries, child and family care organizations.

Lack of knowledge about these initial needs, results in the feeling of insufficiency, stress, loneliness, and frustration in situations newcomers are in need of any of these, and of course in need of many more issues.

### **Swedish Language classes/practices:**

Swedish language knowledge is the most important element in social integration improvement of international students. Speaking in Swedish language helps them communicating easily and more efficiently with the host nationals. They can enter to

the Swedish society and distinguish core cultural patterns and values. Through the Swedish social media they can be exposed to contemporary social, cultural, political events in Sweden. They can fulfill their daily needs easier. Furthermore, from academic point of view, speaking Swedish language helps them socialize, and interact with Swedish staff and supervisors at least in fika more conveniently. They can participate in more teaching duties which need Swedish proficiency. Therefore, continuous, high quality Swedish language classes, holding by proficient teachers, at the university campus is strongly recommended.

### **Introducing Swedish culture, society, patterns**

The interviewees discussed that they enjoy knowing more about the Swedish culture, society, values, norms, traditions, Behavioral attitudes, and communication patterns. Therefore, it is recommended that “Swedish society” sessions take place by Swedish cultural experts, in order to make international doctoral students aware of the social facts in Sweden. Furthermore, as suggested by the interviewees, joint events and gathering with the Swedish national and interacting with swedes is recommended. Westwood and Barker (1990) argue that interacting with people from the host culture has positive influences on the academic performances of international students and will lower the likelihood of their dropping out. Church (1982) believes that the level of social interaction between sojourners and host nationals has generally been found to be low, since sojourners tend to communicate and have more interactions with their co-national fellows more. Li & Gasser (2005) claims that thought the process of adoption of international students might be challenging and interacting with host citizens might be energy taking, but is helpful and helps them understand the new culture well.

### **Introducing Persian culture**

Some of the interviewees believed that how Iran is presented to other countries, is only through media and somewhat propaganda. They discussed that it can probably be good to provide opportunities for the doctoral Iranian students, in order to introduce their culture, and country according to realities, to other internationals. This can also be included in intercultural sessions/events hold by the university, which is discussed above. Experts in Persian culture as well as other cultures (with many PhD students in Sweden) can present and introduce cultural patterns, values and communication attitudes to all the employees.

If students have good and helpful information about the characteristics of the host culture, as well as their own culture, the level of culture shock and nasty moments will decrease significantly, and will make them able to communicate and solve their problems more properly. (Lewis, 2006: xvi)



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## Appendix:

This questionnaire was distributed among 30 Iranian doctoral students.

### Questionnaire:

#### Gender

- Female
- Male

#### Age

**How long has it been since you have started your PhD studies in Sweden? \***

- Less than 2 years
- more than 2 years

**Did you study your master degree in Sweden?**

- Yes
- No

**Did you have English language problems (listening, reading, writing) in the first months of your employment at the university? \***

- No, not at all
- To some extent
- Yes, a lot

**Do you think that the effects of immigration (such as home sickness, financial/social problems, cultural differences, frustration and...) impacted on your studies when you first started your PhD in Sweden? \***

- Not at all
- To some extent
- Yes, a lot

**How did you cope with the cultural differences in your workplace? \***



- I tried to be flexible, and do what others do, by observing their behaviors and attitudes in the workplace, and following the same patterns in similar situations.
- I asked the staff directly about the routines and norms.
- Other:

**In terms of cultural differences, what factor do you think is the main obstacle in your way to improve your socially and academically? \***

- Language (English/Swedish) problems
- lack of knowledge & difference in Cultural/social patterns and norms
- Other:

**Did you experience major differences in educational system (PhD studies) of Iran and Sweden? Which educational system you prefer? \***

- Yes. I prefer Sweden.
- Yes. I prefer Iran.
- No, but I prefer Sweden.
- No, but I prefer Iran.

**And finally, which of the following did you experience? (In the first days of your employment) \***

- I was shocked by the behaviors of students toward professors.
- I was shocked by differences in daily time schedule, such as meal time, breaks and fika.
- I was afraid to say/do something, and it will be considered as not polite or in contradict to social norms, and it cause problem.
- I had fewer subjects to talk, due to lack of knowledge about contemporary social, political, daily issues in Sweden. And less intimacy with the professor and non-Iranian staff.
- Sometimes I had educational related problems, but I was shy to ask for solutions because I didn't know how the cultural / social pattern in Sweden is.