

International Students' Cultural Experiences: Exploring Socio-Cultural and Academic Adjustment in Malaysian Universities

ROSELIND WAN¹, SHAHRINA MD. NORDIN², RADZUAN BIN RAZALI³

¹Management & Humanities Department

²Management & Humanities Department

³Fundamental & Applied Sciences Faculty

Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS, Bandar Seri Iskandar, 31750 Tronoh, Perak Darul Ridzuan, MALAYSIA (Tel: +605 3688000; Fax: +605 3654075.

Email: roselind_wan@petronas.com.my).

Abstract: - Eight Hundred and thirty-one international students from seven public and private universities in Malaysia were surveyed in a preliminary research to explore the students' socio-cultural and academic adjustment in universities. The survey questionnaire requires respondents to answer a 20-item measure of difficulty they face in relation to their interaction under two dimensions: socio-cultural and academic dimensions. Pearson correlation coefficient shows a positive relationship between social integration and academic adaptation with a significant level of 0.01. The higher the ability of the students to adapt socially into the new environment, the better their capability is in making adjustment academically.

Key-words: - multi-cultural experience, cross cultural adaptation, socio-cultural adjustment, academic adjustment.

1 Introduction

The proliferation of international pursuit for knowledge in higher institutions of learning has been largely accelerated by the globalized nature of the workplace which demands for students to prepare themselves for the skills to work in a multi-cultural global environment. This is not a new phenomenon however as [1] estimate that there were more than 2.7 million international students studying away from their home countries in 2005 with 70% of these students studying in the US, the UK, Germany, France and Australia. Nonetheless a shift in the trend of international students' mobility is seen in recent years with a growing number of international students making their way to non-traditional host countries such as China, Singapore and Malaysia. In fact, 12% of the global students' population is enrolled in these countries alone. Malaysia for example, has set a target of 10 – 30% international students' enrolment under its internationalization program [2].

Currently there are 86,000 international students studying in universities across Malaysia, with the number expected to rise to 150,000 in 2015 [3]. The

largest groups of international students are from countries of Southeast Asia, Middle Eastern countries, Middle Asia, African countries and a small number from Europe [4]. The rise in the number of international students enrolled in the country has consequently resulted in a noticeable shift in the demographic landscape of Malaysian universities. Undoubtedly, the Malaysian classroom has always been itself regarded as a melting pot of cultures due to its population diverse mix, but the concept of diversity and multi-cultural has now inevitably embraced new meanings. The inclusion of an international constituency where cultural orientations, cultural values, beliefs, patterns of behavior and ways of learning are different [5], means new cultural implication to policy makers and educators alike. This diverse multi-cultural mix of students brings along new challenges and called attention for the need to understand how international students make adjustment. Several studies on students' experiences in higher education have reported that international students faced difficulties in making adjustment to their new socio-cultural environment [6][7][8][9].

Some of the challenges experienced by international students include difficulty interacting with local students [10][11], problem communicating in the English language due to differences in accent, enunciation and slang [6][7][4] and finding daily necessities such as food [12]. In addition to their struggles acclimatizing to their new cultural and social environment, international students are also overwhelmed with trying to manage the academic demands of the universities [12][13][14]. Further, pattern of studies on international students' adjustment highlights issues of culture shock, intercultural experiences, academic performance, personality traits, cultural background and social interaction [15].

A better understanding of how international students make the necessary adjustment is imminent in view of the ever growing international students' population in universities across the country each year. Gay [16] proposes the notion that understanding student' needs and how they cope in their new environment provides educators insights to be effective in their teaching. This is because the diversity of the classroom provides them the opportunity to reflect on the learning environment, their teaching strategies and most importantly, develop professional skills in the job [17]. This study investigates the challenges faced by international students' in Malaysia. Specifically, the study aims to find to what extent international students face difficulties in their socio-cultural adaptations to the local environment as well as the difficulty they face in adjusting to their academic environment.

2 Literature Review

The concept of adjustment in relation to international students' adaptation to their new environment has been described in many ways and although there is a general agreement for the lack of clarity to what adjustment means [18][6] most writers tend to approach the study by looking at two domains proposed by [19] i.e. the psychological (stress and coping ability) domain and socio-cultural (behavioral and cultural coping ability) domain. Most writers hold the view that adjustment is a transitional process in which students learn how to overcome psychological distress and how students learn to make the necessary adjustment to the challenges that they encounter in their studies, i.e. academic-specific

problems in terms of communication, their adjustment to the local diet, financial problem and problem with management [6]. Anderson's [20] examination of adjustment among international students describes this process as a dynamic and interactive process, one which tries to find the "fit" between the person and the environment. The contention is that students' positive experiences help facilitate the students' adjustment process in their new environment [21].

A literature search on studies conducted with regards to international students' cultural experiences in Malaysian universities highlights three recent studies. Zura Mahmud et al. [4] investigate the challenges faced by undergraduate international students in Malaysia and found that students faced challenges in three areas which they grouped into three major themes, i.e. culture, climate and care. Further, an element of culture which they identified as a hindrance to international students' adjustment is the English language. International students have difficulty in understanding the local accent "...the people speaking English, but they sound Malay". Although this may not be the case of a problem in language proficiency per se, but it does however indicate a need for cultural sensitivity to different nuances of the English language as spoken by different people from different cultures [22]. Nonetheless, the difficulty in understanding the language, albeit the accent, may affect students in their academic domain far more than it does their socio-cultural domain because students feel that in academic situations, they have far more at stake than in social interactions [7].

Another study conducted among international students in Malaysian universities shows similar finding of international students' apprehension of the English language [12]. In their study, 35% of the students feel that their English proficiency is not adequate for their learning need while majority (54%) worry about academic performance in general. Interestingly, only 10% are worried about cultural barriers, suggesting that since Malaysia shares some similar cultures (e.g. religion) with the largely Arab students' population, they therefore do not find it difficult to adjust to the social expectations of their host. In [15] examining the diversity and multicultural awareness that influences the growth and development of Middle Eastern graduate students in Universiti Sains Malaysia, the author investigates four main themes: quality of contact among

international students, friendship patterns, social support networks and perception of international students on the larger community. He found that there is significant low interaction between international students and local students although international students show more willingness for greater contacts with local students.

There is a strong correlation between students' multicultural experiences and their adjustment to their new environment. For example, a study on the impact of multicultural experience in the development of socio-cultural adaptation for international business students in Monash University, Australia, reports a significant link between students' multicultural experience and their socio-cultural adaptation [8]. This positive relationship is said to develop as students interact and form relationship with those from the host culture. Al-Sharideh and Goe [6] describes this as an "association hypothesis" which based their assumption that through interaction with host nationals, students obtain social support, language proficiency and become familiar with the host society customs and values. They measure adjustment in a variety of ways including "overall satisfaction", "proportion of free time spent with American" and "number of host friends". It is assumed that international students who are able to assimilate to the American culture and learn to effectively interact with American will be more successful.

Despite suggestions that students who share similar cultures will have less cultural apprehension [6][12], having a strong social relationship with students from the same or similar background does not necessarily make it any easier for students to adjust. Tsang [9] found that in spite of their cultural similarity, mainland Chinese academics and Chinese students in Singapore still had to go through an adjustment process. This is attributed to the fact that even if the host culture is somewhat similar to the home culture, they still need to adjust to the host institutional environment as they can differ from that of their home country (China). Inevitably, a better understanding of international students' experiences in adjusting to the host country help educators to appreciate the challenges faced by their students and thus be able to respond by adjusting their teaching approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of their classroom [23]. However, despite the large number of international students in Malaysian universities, [15] pointed out that this does not necessarily

translate to better inter-cultural interactions and understanding.

This study explores international students' adjustment patterns while studying in Malaysia and how their experiences have significant implications on learning and teaching. Specifically it describes the adjustment that students have to make in two domains; i.e. socio-cultural and academic domains and the extent of difficulty they experience in various situations in the university.

3 Methodology

Undergraduate students were chosen as respondents in the study as they make the largest number of international students in Malaysia. With the help of student representatives, 1000 questionnaire forms were randomly distributed to international students at seven universities but only 831 forms were returned, which is a significant response rate at 83.1%. Three government linked universities (GLU) were identified, i.e. Universiti Teknologi PETRONAS (UTP), Multimedia University (MU) and Universiti Tenaga Nasional (UniTEN), while three public universities known to have high number of international students, i.e. Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) and Universiti Islam Antarabangsa (UIA) including one Australian branch campus, Curtin University in Miri, Sarawak were also included as respondent universities. The students were from 41 countries and regions in Asia majority of which are from the Middle East.

Data for the study were collected through distribution of survey forms. The questionnaire requires respondents to answer a 20-item measure of difficulty they face in relation to their interaction under two dimensions: socio-cultural and academic dimensions. The questionnaire adapted in part Ward and Kennedy's Socio-cultural adjustment scale which covers the socio-cultural dimension, while questions about how they make adjustments in class make up the academic dimension of the study. The five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = No Difficulty to 5 = Extreme Difficulty was used to determine respondents' cultural adjustments in both their social-cultural and academic situations. Personal information of the students such as country of origin, gender, age, and length of stay in Malaysia were part of the background information required in the

questionnaire. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data which is discussed in the following section.

4 Results and Discussion

Seven universities took part in the survey with 831 randomly selected respondents. The seven universities represent the public, private and branch of an international university in Malaysia (see Figure 1) where the respondents vary in terms of their nationalities originating from 41 different countries across the globe. The diversity of the respondents in their nationalities, background and cultures provided a rich data and insight for the study. More than 85% of the respondents have stayed in Malaysia between one to four years which enable them to reflect on their experience studying in Malaysia when responding to the questionnaires.

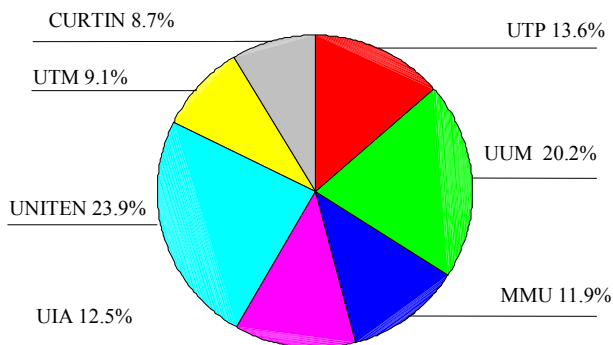


Fig. 1. Percentage of respondents according to University

The alpha values are above 0.7 for the two dimensions in the questionnaire (see Table 1 and 2 for the alpha values) establishing the reliability of the instrument used. The first dimension gauges the ability of the students to adapt to their social environment. The total mean score for the social dimension which consists of nine items is average (2.4), between the scale of facing slight difficulty and moderate difficulty. The findings thus generally indicate that the international students face a degree of difficulty in adapting to their new social environment. Such finding is consistent with several other studies on foreign students' experience in making adjustment to their new environment

[6][7][8][9]. Pearson correlation coefficient shows that there is a positive relationship between social integration and academic adaptation with a significant level of 0.01 (see Table 1). The higher the ability of the students to adapt socially into the new environment, the better their capability is in making adjustment academically. Hence, social support is essentially crucial to minimize the sense of loss in the host country and for these students to make quick adjustment to the new environment in order for them to be able to focus on academic related matters.

Table 1 Correlation between social and academic dimensions.

		Social	Academic
Social	Pearson Correlation	1	.616(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.000
	N	689	613
Academic	Pearson Correlation	.616(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.
	N	613	719

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In the Social Dimension, nine questions relating to students' social adaptation were asked based on Ward and Kennedy [19] framework (See Table 2). Majority of the students find it difficult to get the kind of food that they would enjoy (mean=2.82) which becomes one of the challenges faced by these students. Dietary adjustment has consistently been found as one of the main problems confronted by international students when studying abroad [24]. Adapting to local accommodation is another area that the students find moderately difficult (mean= 2.53). It is important for the international students to be able to adapt and have cultural integration within their residential places because if they fail to do so, it would be even more difficult for them to adapt to their academic environment. There seems to be a need for adequate intervention for improvement by institutions in facilitating dietary expectations and adaptation to accommodation as these are the basic human needs. The finding is also consistent with a study by [25] on international students' learning experience in an institution in Malaysia, discussing

the need for institutions to handle food and accommodation more effectively.

Table 2 Social Dimensions

Items	Mean
Finding food that you enjoy	2.82
Using the transport system	2.53
Following rules and regulations	2.29
Dealing with bureaucracy (administration)	2.74
Making your-self understood	2.42
Understanding the host country value system.	2.38
Worshipping in your usual way	1.97
Understanding ethnic or cultural differences	2.23
Adapting to local accommodation	2.53
Total mean	2.40
Reliability (α)	0.80

* 1 = No Difficulty to 5 = Extreme Difficulty

* The higher the mean is the higher the level of difficulty

Another daily activity that the students find challenging is dealing with bureaucracy in administration of the university (mean=2.74). Similarly, [25] reported frustrations about administrative processes faced by the international students but it was quickly resolved after the students became more familiar with the system. They also find making themselves understood (mean=2.42) when communicating with others slightly difficult. Such finding is parallel to the findings by [10] and [11], indicating difficulty in interacting with local students as one of the challenges experienced by international students. This could be due to differences in accent, enunciation and slang [6][7][4]. This also indicates insufficient flexibility in communicating with the local communities and more importantly it may also affect students academically e.g. Al-Zubadidi & Rechards [12], especially when academic achievement poses a higher stake than in social interactions [7]. On a similar ground, [26] discusses the importance of self-efficacy in building language skill that determines the person's ability to communicate with the various nationalities in the host country. Sharpening language skills is of paramount importance as they are key to "adaptive life" (p.90) and ease communications.

The students find cultural differences and the host country value system slightly difficult (mean=2.23; 2.38) to understand. Such findings strengthen revelations by [4] that international students in Malaysia faced challenges in three main areas which one of them is culture. Previous studies similarly revealed that cultural difference is a key factor in difficulties to adapt to new environment [7]. Such discomfort may lead to culture shock if there is no proper social support. Culture shock is simply defined in [27] as experiences that lead to unpleasant feeling when encountering new culture. The students may find it difficult to socialize due to difference in cultural values and practices. This may hinder integration and blending in for progressive adaptation to new environment that could put considerable pressure on the students. The students however find that they can worship their own God in their usual way (mean=1.9). Even though Malaysia is an Islamic country, the communities are allowed to profess any religious activities. Hence this poses the least problem to the international students in Malaysia.

In the Academic Dimension, echoing discussions by [13] and [14] the findings similarly reveal that international students are also overwhelmed in trying to meet the academic demands of the universities (See Table 3). The overall findings of the academic dimension indicate that the international students generally find it slightly difficult in their efforts to meet the academic expectations in Malaysia.

Table 3 Academic Dimensions

Understanding what is required from you at university	2.18
Expressing your ideas in class	2.19
Participate in class discussion	2.15
Working in team for class projects	2.33
Doing an oral presentation	2.10
Understanding lecturers' accent	2.58
Work with students from other cultures	2.30
Writing essay assignments in English	1.94
Coping with assignments	2.30
Seeking lecture's clarification on assignments	2.34
Communicating in English	1.99
Total mean	2.20
Reliability (α)	0.84

* 1 = No Difficulty to 5 = Extreme Difficulty

* The higher the mean is the higher the level of difficulty

They find it slightly difficult to understand what is required by the university. This could also be due to the transition from school background to university academic requirement but the transition maybe more daunting for international students than the local students with greater uncertainties to fit into university academic cultures [28][29]. They also find slight difficulty in expressing ideas in class, participating in class discussion, working in team for class projects, doing an oral presentation, working with students from other cultures, and coping with assignments (see table 2 for the mean scores).

Self-perceived insufficient ability to blend in may have an impact on participating academically. The problem seems to lie in the ability for social integration rather than language proficiency as they do not find much difficulty in using the language itself (for example to communicate in English and write essay assignments in English - where the means are comparatively lower). They however find it difficult to carry out tasks that require social integration like working in team for class projects (mean=2.33) and working with students from other cultures (mean=2.30). Lewthwaite [24] rightly pointed out that the international students may find that their level of English is sufficient for academic pursuance but their lack of “social language” (p.171) may hinder them from participating in social situations, which may also occur in learning activities in the classrooms. The students may feel self-conscious when interacting in class or group discussion in fear of grammatical errors or mispronunciations.

The students have difficulty in understanding lecturers' accent which could be due to local dialectal variations and slang. This could be improved with proper training which is a pertinent matter especially when the lecturers in these institutions could play a significant role in helping the students in cultural adaptation and academic adjustments through pedagogies or their approach in teaching. The activities in classroom can be made more interactive providing the students with ample opportunities to express their opinions and through discussions amongst the peers. Such approach concurs with [25] findings on the preference for interactive classrooms where students are engaged in open discussion, class debates, and a dialogue with their lecturers.

5 Conclusion

With the advent of globalization, it has been an increasing trend for universities to admit students from other countries. Cross cultural adaptation is indeed a complex process and students must quickly learn to adapt so that they can function effectively in the host country. Hence institutions of higher learning need to take on social responsibilities to go beyond attending to administrative matters but also addressing intercultural adaptation. The findings of this study to some extent reveal the level of difficulty faced by the foreign students studying in Malaysia which require acculturation programs and structured support systems. This move is essentially crucial especially at the entry point of these students into the Malaysian learning environment to facilitate smooth adaptation.

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