

International Students' Academic Adjustment in Private Universities in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia is known for having a mixed population with diverse backgrounds and religions living in peace. Malaysian education systems opened their doors to foreign countries in 1996, allowing for the establishment of branch campuses, and the private education system entered our educational sector. Since then, many international students have travelled to Malaysia to study. According to the Star Online in 2019, Malaysian higher education institutions have registered more than 170,000 international students from over 135 countries for their intercultural adaptation experiences. The top three countries are from Bangladesh, Indonesia, and China. This qualitative study investigates the academic adjustment experiences of international students in private universities in Malaysia through the lens of Cross-Cultural Adaptation (CCA) theory. Employing in-depth interviews, the research seeks to unveil the intricate processes, challenges, and adaptive strategies that shape the academic trajectories of international students within the Malaysian higher education landscape. The study aims to explore how cultural, linguistic, and academic factors influence the academic adaptation of international students. Through purposive sampling, participants will share their personal narratives, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between cultural nuances and the pursuit of academic success. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data will uncover patterns and insights into the ways in which international students negotiate academic challenges and integrate into the Malaysian educational milieu. The findings aim to contribute to the broader understanding of cross-cultural adaptation in academic settings, providing context-specific knowledge that can inform institutional policies and practices to foster a more inclusive and supportive environment for international students in Malaysian private universities.

Keywords: *International Students, undergraduate, adaptation, challenges, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of globalising education has resulted in a notable time of internationalisation, wherein students from many geographical locations partake in educational endeavours to gain knowledge and participate in cultural exchange. Malaysia has emerged as a favoured destination for international students seeking a top-notch education in a diverse and urban environment, owing to its multiculturalism and thriving higher education sector (Marginson, 2010).

The aim of this study is to investigate the intricate challenges faced by international students in private higher education institutions in Malaysia. This journal article provides a unique perspective by examining the experiences of overseas students specifically in the Malaysian private university system, which is an area that has received less study attention. The objective is to actively engage in the ongoing discourse regarding the globalisation of education and the well-being of students who embark on this transformative endeavour. This research aims to add to the continuing discussion regarding the internationalisation of

education and the well-being of international students by comprehending the various problems they face, including academic, cultural, and social obstacles. This study provides an in-depth review of the obstacles encountered by international students, encompassing insights from both scholars and the students themselves. The purpose is to provide light on the diverse experiences and perspectives of these international students, considering the conditions prior to and following the pandemic, which have added a further layer of complexity to the global education landscape. The objective of this initiative is to establish a more comprehensive and intellectually engaging educational environment for international students, thereby bolstering Malaysia's standing as a sought-after global education hub. According to Statista (2023, June 19), Figure 1 shows the number of international students studying in higher education institutes in Malaysia in 2022, by country of origin (in 1,000s).

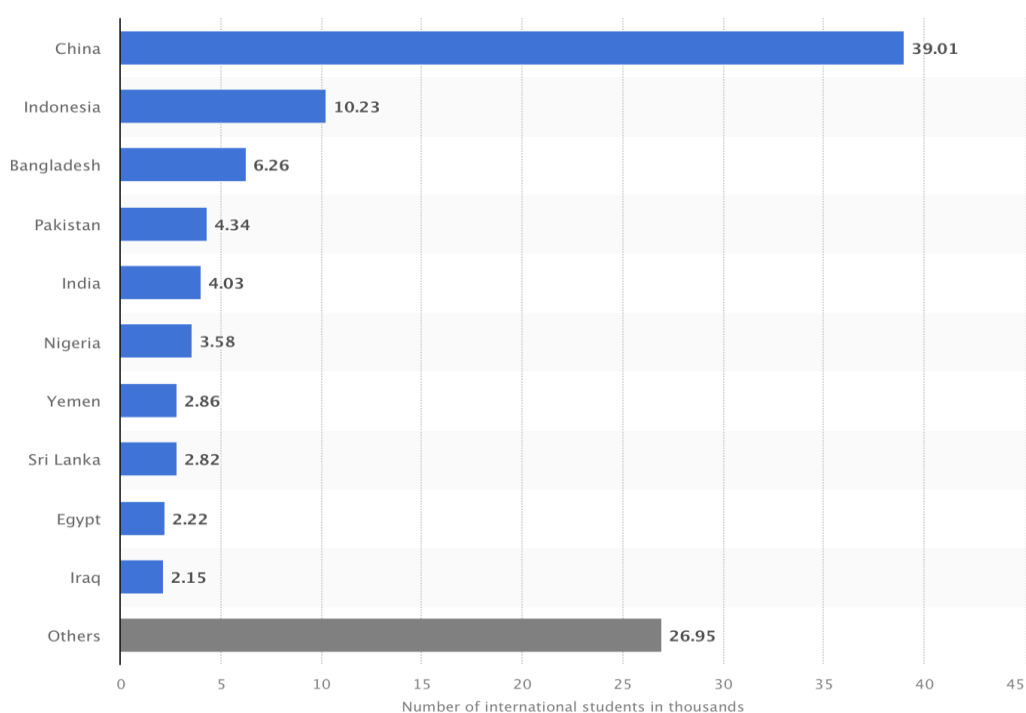


Figure 1: International students' enrolment in Malaysia in 2022
Source: Statista (2023)

LITERATURE REVIEW

International students had distinct challenges inside their respective academic institutions in the host country (Alsaahfi & Shin, 2019). As per the OECD (2020), international students are defined as individuals who have received their previous education in a different country and are not residents of the country where they are currently studying. These students will face a new environment and will have the opportunity to undergo various life-altering experiences. However, these individuals are students who lack experience and are unfamiliar with the new culture.

Ward et al. (2001) found that international students encounter intricate difficulties due to cultural disparities between their home country and the host country. Moreover, the issues intensify as the distance from their home country increases. The number of overseas students in Malaysia has declined in 2021 as a result of the global pandemic that occurred worldwide in 2020. The figures decreased to 58,063 in comparison to the previous year.

Each culture worldwide possesses a distinct viewpoint regarding individuals. The impact of globalisation on the world is evident, since it facilitates the easy acquisition of knowledge about different cultures. Acquiring knowledge about different cultures enables us to comprehend that the process of adaptation will be facilitated. Zhou and Griffiths (2011) describe culture as a set of supplementary customs that serve to differentiate individuals from different cultural groups. Culture encompasses an individual's manner of living, which encompasses their clothing, food preferences, musical tastes, and recreational activities. Furthermore, it encompasses nationalities, perspectives, concepts, norms, and dispositions (Bryam, 1989). In 2016, Malaysia was recognised as the 10th most popular place for international students to pursue their studies, according to ICEF Monitor (2016). Previous literature by Thuraisingam and Singh (2010) has primarily examined the adaptation experiences of international students in relation to cultural differences. However, recent studies have shifted their focus towards the socio-cultural, psychological, and academic aspects of adaptation in Western countries. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research that specifically explores the perspectives of Southeast Asian and Malaysian students.

Datuk Parmjit Singh, the President of the Malaysian Association of Private Colleges and Universities (MAPCU), asserted that a small number of international students had encountered a comparable situation and alleged that they were being subjected to arbitrary enforcement. He expressed his discontent with the manner in which law enforcement authorities handle overseas students, specifically pointing out that certain raids occur when students are dining near their accommodations and commuting to and from their educational institutions (Chin, 2019).

There have been additional concerns regarding Nigerian students studying in Malaysia, with several newspaper headlines highlighting the presence of stereotypes and discrimination. The instances were documented by (Malay Mail Online, 2013; Free Malaysia Today, 2018; South China Morning Post, 2018; The Sun Daily, 2020), regarding the inhospitable behaviour of the native Malaysians towards Nigerian residents and students in Malaysia. In a reported incident documented by the South China Morning Post in 2018, the owners of a condominium in Cheras displayed a banner explicitly expressing their opposition to African individuals by stating "say NO to African people".

According to Singh, Jack and Schapper (2012), difficulties in adapting to a new environment can significantly hinder the academic performance, as well as the social and psychological adaptability, of international students. This is substantiated by a study conducted by GulRaihan and Sandaran (2017), in which they examined four crucial elements that influence the adaptation of international students in Malaysia. These aspects include language hurdles, academic challenges, environmental issues, and interpersonal relationships. In addition, numerous other scholars have highlighted the same issue, including the cultural, climatic, and linguistic factors (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Mahmud et al., 2010; Naeeni et al., 2015; Asgari & Borzooei, 2014). Moreover, this study will investigate the adjustment of international students who opt for Malaysia as their educational choice.

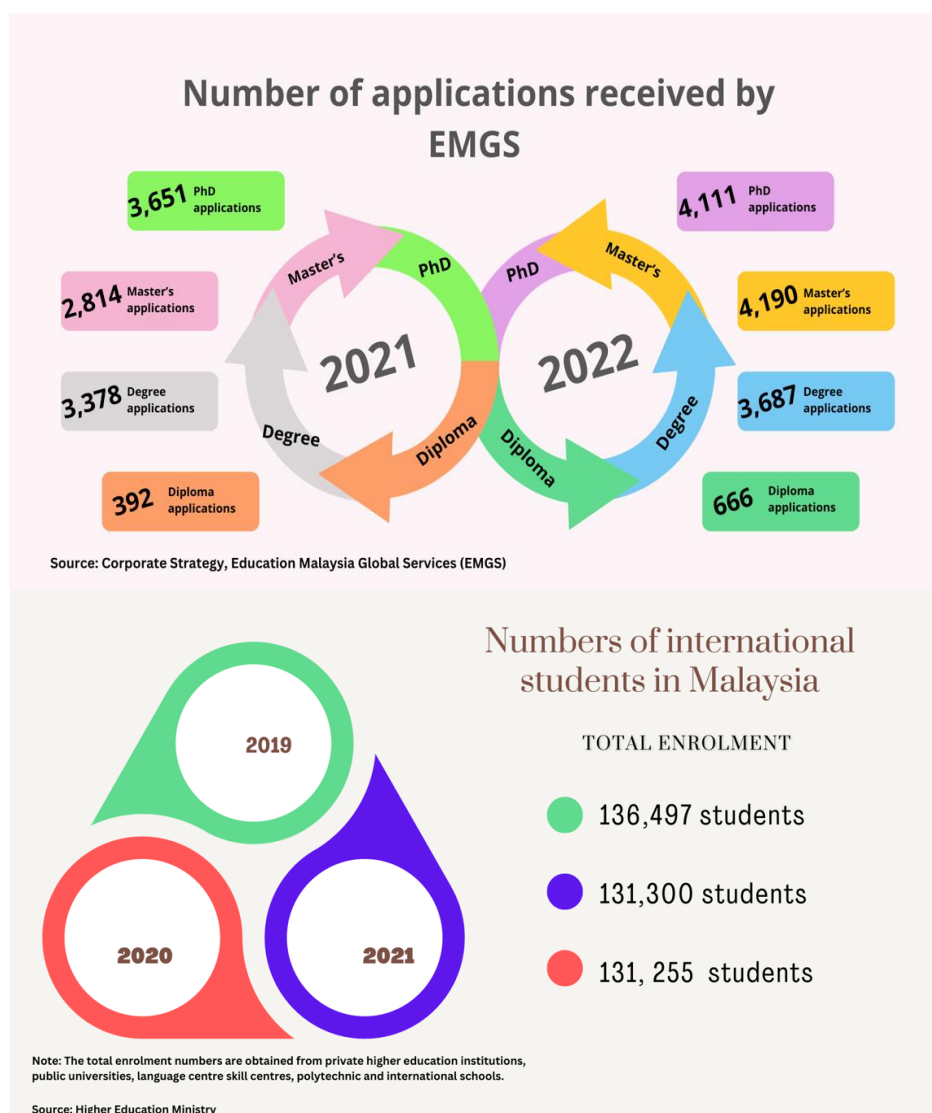


Figure 2: International students' enrolment in Malaysia
 Source: The Star Online (7 August 2022)

Malaysian International Students Challenges and Issues

Extensive study has been conducted on the obstacles faced by international students in adapting to a new environment. Previous studies have focused on how these students navigate cultural differences, such as those related to cuisine and language. Churchill and DuFon (2006) emphasised the significance of doing ongoing research on the academic and socio-cultural adjustment of overseas students. Comparing the adjustment of international students who choose to study in European countries and the Asian region would not yield the same results. This is due to differences in environment and lifestyle. Furthermore, there is a lack of specific research that focuses on examining the cognitive adjustment of these international students in Malaysian Higher Education Institutions (Pandian, 2008; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Yusoff, & Chelliah, 2010; Pandian, Baboo, & Mahfoodh, 2013; Mahfoodh, 2014). Extensive research has been conducted on the experiences of international students, primarily focusing on the cultural and psychological aspects. This research delves into the psychological and socio-cultural adjustments that international students undergo during their time abroad (Cantwell et al., 2009; Cetinkaya-Yildiz et al., 2011; Jon et al., 2014).

Another important factor influencing the adaptation of international students is the duration of their stay. According to Yusoff and Chelliah (2010), research on demographic factors and socio-cultural adjustment reveals significant differences in impersonal behaviour and cultural comprehension between international students who have lived in Malaysia for more than one or two years. Prior research conducted by Alavi and Mansor (2011), Berry (1985), and Mustapha, Rahman and Md. Yunus (2010) have identified four distinct domains of challenges faced by international students during the process of acculturation. The initial domain concerns environmental elements, encompassing the adaptation to novel food sources, living conditions, and modes of transportation. The second domain pertains to socio-cultural obstacles, including managing interpersonal relationships, group dynamics, and social interactions. The third domain focuses on academic challenges, such as insufficient English proficiency, variations in assessment methods, and difficulties in meeting assignment deadlines. The final domain encompasses psychological issues, such as experiencing stress, homesickness, loneliness, and grappling with self-esteem and identity problems. Language proficiency limits effective communication and intercultural competence (Volet & Ang, 1998; Yates & Wahid, 2013; Yu, 2013). Another obstacle highlighted by Chu, Khan, Jahn and Kraemer (2015) was the difficulty of assimilating into the host culture.

Moreover, studies conducted by Abdullah (2011), Cotterall (2011), Hellsten (2002), Owens and Loomes (2011), Sawir, Marginson, Duemert, Nyland, and Ramia (2008), Wang et al. (2015), and Yu (2010) have examined the challenges faced by international students in integrating into society. These challenges include difficulties in understanding socio-cultural norms and limited interaction with local students. According to Halim, Mustaffa, and Azizan (2020), those who arrive from the Middle East may encounter more difficulties compared to those who are accustomed to a comparable culture. This is because China and Malaysia have a shared cultural heritage, resulting in fewer complications when adapting. The overseas students were observed engaging mostly with their own social cohort, contributing to their social isolation. According to a study conducted by Wan, Md. Nordin, and Razali in (2013), over 85% of international students have resided in Malaysia for a period ranging from one to four years. This extended duration allows these students to effectively apply their previous experiences of studying in Malaysia to adapt to a new environment. However, these international students still encounter difficulties in adapting themselves, and there exists a positive correlation between their social integration and academic adaptation. Consequently, social support plays a crucial role in mitigating the feelings of isolation and exclusion experienced by international students within society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Cross-Cultural Adaptation

The phenomenon of Cross-Cultural Adaptation encompasses a temporal process wherein individuals gradually assimilate into a novel cultural milieu. This process is underscored by the deliberate cultivation and sustenance of a robust and communal rapport with the host culture through adaptive endeavours. The process of acclimating to a novel environment is intricately tied to communication, constituting a multifaceted and dynamic undertaking. After comprehending the intricacies of cross-cultural adaptation, international students are tasked with cultivating an understanding of their own cultural identity. This initiates a series of events involving cross-cultural adaptation, acculturation, and de-acculturation. As asserted by Kim (2017), international students universally find the imperative to establish and fortify

cohesion, assertiveness, and resilience within the host country, thereby perpetuating the continuum of cross-cultural adaptation, an undertaking that persists despite variations in individual circumstances (Kim, 2017). Additionally, Kim (2017) contends that the Integrated Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation serves as a framework elucidating the nuanced factors influencing how and why individuals from diverse ethical or national backgrounds may undergo divergent adaptation experiences (Kim & Kim, 2016).

The validity of the Cross-Cultural Adaptation (CCA) theory has been subject to scrutiny by various scholars, including Curtin (2010), De la Garza and Ono (2015), Kraidy (2005), and Kramer (2008). These scholars challenge the notion of "assimilation" as the definitive trajectory of change in individuals, thereby questioning its applicability as the overarching direction in the protracted course of cross-cultural adaptation, extensively investigated in studies involving immigrants and long-term residents (Waters, 2014). Nevertheless, for the present study, the Cross-Cultural Adaptation theory proves apt due to its concentration on the individual's adaptation experiences and challenges, diverging from the restrictive focus on the temporal dimension offered by the U-Curve theory. This research explicitly directs its attention to the intricacies and predicaments encountered by international students during their adaptation, delving deeper into the nuances of individual experiences. Grounded in Kim's theory (2001), the investigation posits that the level of international students' adaptation is contingent upon their national background and unique personal experiences.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs the qualitative research approach. Qualitative research methods are valuable for capturing complexity because they are attentive to the social construction of meaning, as described by Lindolf (2009), and sensitive to individuals' experiences and communications, as noted by Keyton (2015, p.262). This research focuses on understanding the experiences of international students as individuals. Therefore, qualitative methods are deemed the most effective approach for gathering the necessary material to address the research issues. Brennan (2017) argues that qualitative researchers lack clarity when it comes to selecting a paradigm for their research. However, the theoretical framework of a study has a more significant role in guiding the research topic and chosen methodology. The qualitative research approach will provide the framework for conducting and analysing an in-depth interview utilising thematic analysis. The motivation for choosing in-depth interviews lies in its ability to delve further into subjects and its interest in comprehending, elucidating, predicting, and mediating interactions among participants. The characteristics and criteria of informants are as follows:

- i. The international student
- i. Stay in Malaysia for at least more than 3 months
- iii. Postgraduate students who have just registered and completed their first-degree program in Malaysia
- iv. Students from year one to year three in the degree program

The selection of international students is conducted via purposive sampling. The data collected was mostly centred around the informant's apprehensions and difficulties encountered while adjusting to life in Malaysia. While the previous study provided valuable insights for future research, its capacity to expand cultural learning while study abroad was restricted. The objective of the study is to get further insights into the perspectives of students and the rationale for their experiences abroad through qualitative research. As

stated by Creswell (2018), qualitative research is commonly carried out in person, when the researcher directly interacts with participants through interviews. It mostly focuses on personal aspects rather than variables or metrics. Consequently, the researcher's focus revolves around the adaptation issues and obstacles faced by overseas students.

During the interview, the international students were allotted time to respond to the queries. Permission was requested at the onset of the interview, as Malaysia was still in the pandemic phase at the time the interview was conducted.

Figure 1: Profile of Interviewee

Number	Name	Country	Gender	Age (years old)
1	AA	Xinjiang	Female	24
2	AK	Brunei	Male	23
3	CA	Germany	Male	22
4	OM	Afghanistan	Male	26
5	SM	Saudi Arabia	Male	23
6	LS	Mozambique	Female	25
7	SS	Sudan	Female	21
8	SC	Tanzania	Male	24
9	MH	Yemen	Male	25
10	JT	Indonesia	Male	21
11	HS	Korea	Male	20
12	MA	Pakistan	Female	19

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A purposive sampling technique was employed by the researcher to conduct in-depth interviews with approximately twelve international students, spanning in age from first to third year. These international students originate from many academic disciplines and several private universities. A small percentage of questions were addressed regarding the individual's personal history, ability to adapt to academic settings, and any difficulties encountered due to language differences. The data collected from the interviews were transcribed into coded themes.

a) Cultural Differences

Previous research has shown that a substantial proportion of international students encounter various challenges during their academic pursuits in foreign nations. These issues encompass variations in culture, language obstacles, challenges in acclimating to varied religious customs, unfamiliar ways of life, and social norms, as well as considerations pertaining to food and personal welfare. Notable problems in this context encompass experiences of social isolation and difficulties in assimilating with native students (Rivas, Hale, & Burke, 2019; Almutairi, 2020; Alsulami, 2021). Wang (2008) posits that international students who have travelled a significant distance from their country of origin encounter significant changes in all facets of their lives. According to a study conducted by Rivas, Hale, and Burke (2019), data obtained from interviews with 10 international students enrolled in private universities in Malaysia revealed that these students highlighted differences in beliefs, habits, and language between Malaysia and their respective home countries.

- *Challenges in Adapting to Diverse Lives, Beliefs, and Local Cuisine.*

Malaysia, an inclusive nation that values and respects various cultures, designates Islam as its official religion. The nation encompasses a diverse array of religious affiliations, such as Christianity, Hinduism, and several others. The majority of the indigenous Malay population predominantly adheres to the Islamic faith, actively engaging in religious practises like as attending mosques for prayer. Christians attend churches concurrently, whereas Hindus frequently frequent temples. International students of similar religious backgrounds compare the religious ceremonies and customs they observe in Malaysia with those performed in their own countries. The country encompasses a diverse array of religious affiliations, including as Christianity, Hinduism, and several others. The majority of the indigenous Malay population predominantly adheres to the Islamic faith, actively engaging in religious practises like as attending mosques for prayer. Christians attend churches concurrently, whereas Hindus frequently frequent temples. International students of similar religious backgrounds compare the religious ceremonies and customs they observe in Malaysia with those performed in their own countries.

SM stated that his current living arrangement is quite advantageous because to its handy proximity to a local mosque, which he deeply appreciates. On the other hand, HS, who is from Korea, mentioned that he was unfamiliar with the azan during his first week in Malaysia. Moreover, he had an understanding of the importance of the azan only when his Arabian acquaintance offered an explanation. Furthermore, he gained a handful of Arabic vocabulary phrases from his connection with his acquaintance. AA, who hails from Xinjiang, China, is amazed to observe the local population in Malaysia openly wearing the Hijab and attending the mosque during her initial two weeks in the country. The striking disparity between her own country, which has limited opportunities due to certain limitations, and the current situation is very enlightening for her. Regarding MA from Pakistan, she discussed the distinctions in her native country, which is also a predominantly Muslim nation.

SM: ..the best experience actually, it was really easy for me to go to the mosque anywhere I can find a mosque which is the most important thing for me as a Muslim..

HS: ..actually I was very surprised like when the....when it's time to pray the song (azan) can hear, I don't know what song it was for first time here..

AA: ..before 2 weeks right, first, maybe shock is like the girls, women, even the young like some 70% percent of the women like who is Malay they wear hijab, that part make me really shock. Even the young and even babies, little girls also wear hijab I was like oh my god, is it like that because for us we not really wear hijab, that's why that's really make me shocked and that make me love it..

MA: ..eventhough Malaysia is a Muslim country, but it is an international thing. I think, there are things is happening is not very "Muslim". For example, Pakistan is a Muslim country. There is no attractions happy hour attractions such as bars, club very openly. In Malaysia, there are things like this here..

MH: ..i have been to my friend's wedding in Kelantan. They invited me to their wedding. The culture is different though we are still Muslim. In my country, you don't see men and women in the same hall during weddings. Here, in Malaysia, I find it quite interesting. Men and women enter in the same hall celebrating the bride and groom. Also in Yemen, you have four days of dancing and celebration. Here, the wedding celebration is quiet. I find it slightly more fun as compared to here in Malaysia..

LS: ..it was easier than I expected. Like I said, I'm a Christian. It was easy for me to find church, with no problem. I was surprised and shocked that I was able to freely worship in the church. Thank you for allowing that. That I wasn't expecting that at all..

When asked about her perspective on the local cuisine, and she expressed that Malaysian food is excessively spicy for her taste,

AA: ..I couldn't remember because I tried many foods because I love to try something new, I tried many things but like I don't like it, like Malaysian spicy, spicy and sweet next together and become a totally different taste. For us, spicy is spicy, we still eat spicy, we separate it, we don't combine together. But I love Roti Canai because morning I eat Roti Canai..

As LS from Mozambique, she expressed a preference for preparing her own meals,

LS: ..so, mostly I cook myself. I don't see any Mozambique food served here. I'll had to adjust a lot and all good now..

In general, it is crucial for international students to familiarise themselves with their new surroundings, religious practises, food, and cultural traditions (Alsaifi & Shin, 2019; Chen, Tabassum, & Saeed, 2019). International students may face challenges as a result of cultural and religious differences.

b) Academic Adjustment

This section specifically addresses the academic adaptation of international students enrolled in private educational institutions in Malaysia. Researchers frequently emphasise academic concerns and their influence on students' performance and overall experience. The primary factor contributing to the significant influence on academic adaptation is culture shock, a prevalent phenomenon experienced by overseas students. According to Baker and Siryk's (1999), it was found that the academic adjustment of students had an impact on their study performance. This is to establish the criteria for academic adjustment, which include academic, special, personal, emotional, and adaptive aspects.

In addition, academic adjustment refers to how students adapt to the disparities in their academic background compared to their typical academic and study environment. On the other hand, social adjustment pertains to how students interact with local host students and the extent of their communication, as well as their involvement in group assignments and university activities. Language acquisition is a fundamental aspect of the adjustment process

for overseas students. International students who are unfamiliar with the language and local slang often avoid engaging in conversations with locals (Tseng et al., 2002; Lin & Yi, 1997; Chen, 1999).

AA shared about her feelings being away from home for quite a long time. She shared about her struggles when her first time step her foot in Malaysia, whereas for LS, she said she did not face any issues in terms of social life as she is always surrounded by helpful locals in her university.

AA: ..I can say this is my first experience living in Malaysia. First time was IIUM, Malaysia. After one year, I moved to Turkey, then I move to Malaysia and come back again n change my university. First time studying abroad in Malaysia quite challenging for me because I away from my home. Usually, I have my brothers and sisters but now I'm alone. I don't know anyone. I don't have any siblings here. I cannot speak English. Thanks god I have friends that can speak Chinese. My friends help me to translate everything. And then for food I cannot eat Malay food to be honest, it quite different some food I cannot accept but it is easy to find Chinese food but it's quite expensive for students. Coz China money is cheaper to Malaysian money. Like if my parents give me a lot of money but it's less here because of prices..

LS: ..No I didn't. I have never had any issues as a matter of fact, I am thankful for all the local students who are always helpful and vice versa..

Regarding CA, he had previous experience travelling to different places, and residing in Malaysia was not his first time being abroad. He stated that he resided in foreign nations previously and encountered difficulties in comprehending the language, but ultimately acclimated to it. When asked about Malaysian cuisine, CA expressed no reservations, asserting that people have diverse tastes and preferences. During the conversation, he shared an interesting insight into social activities that differs from those in Germany.

CA: ..food it was different but not an issue because they have different taste and different preference but I still like it personally, but also..ummm..the school system with the grading is different but also because.. ummm... there is expected differences between high school and university, so it is expected...also... ummm... a lot of extra activities but also activities that I did not find in Germany..like the different culture activities as sports also different, for example, a badminton or futsal is not as popular in Germany but I can find it here..and also different holidays that we don't celebrate in Germany like Deepavali and some other religious holidays..

According to Furnham and Bochner (1986), international students who reside in close proximity to Malaysia are more likely to adapt successfully. This is attributed to their pre-existing familiarity with the language and cultural values, which often resemble those of their home country. The researcher successfully conducted a face-to-face interview with a student from Brunei Darussalam, making them the third overseas student to be interviewed in person. The individual in question is identified as AK. He stated that he visits Malaysia annually to see his grandparents who reside in Negeri Sembilan, but this is his first experience living in

Malaysia on his own. Prior to pursuing his bachelor's degree, he had always remained in close proximity to his family. However, he made the decision to continue his studies abroad in Malaysia. He recounted his experience of struggling to handle his personal finances and time management while living independently.

AK: ..This is not my first experience as I have grandparents in Negeri Sembilan. I've been to Malaysia quite a lot of times. This is my first experience living abroad alone, it's hard coz living far for the first time. Never been alone far away from the family. On the challenges I need to manage my time of study and financial here. Maybe that's the only challenge for me for now. Food quite same with Brunei. My expectations here getting high grade and maybe have job opportunity here if I don't have back in my country. Experience like adventuring something that I don't get back in Brunei..

JT: ..well, in Malaysia, the rain and thunder is more than Indonesia. In my country, I would say it's hotter than in Malaysia. Actually, I have a lot of local friends here because I believe is my face. They say I look more like local, and hardly guess that I am Indonesian..

International students originating from Middle Eastern, African, and European nations may lack familiarity with Malaysia's climate change, linguistic variations, colloquial expressions, cultural norms, and values. These disparities can lead to challenges and difficulties for these international students as they strive to adapt to life in Malaysia (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). OM, originally from Afghanistan, previously resided in a different location prior to Malaysia. He expressed that his challenges in Malaysia primarily revolve around the climate and the local cuisine.

OM: ..Difficulties changing of weather and food. Food is spicy not the same with my country. Malaysia is quite challenge for me specially for first two months. I need to prepare for my IELTS..

In addition to a great deal of research on the problems of these international students' adaptation and challenges, there is also some fascinating research on how these students can cope with cultural differences, such as food and language. According to Churchill and DuFon (2006), it is essential to continue study on the adjustment of international students from the academic to the sociocultural aspects. Based on this, the adjustment of international students in the European countries and the Asian region would be different because of environmental and lifestyle differences, and there are no specific studies examining the psychological adjustment of international students in Malaysian higher education institutions (Pandian, 2008; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010; Pandian, Baboo, & Mahfoodh, 2013; Mahfoodh, 2014).

Fifth informant from Saudi Arabia and his name is SM, he shared that first year was a challenge for him because he cannot speak English compared now. Now he can speak fluently in English as the researcher interview him personally in his campus.

SM: ..First time living abroad, I have been in another countries but it's for visiting. This is first time living abroad away from my family..

These international students did not face challenges in terms of academic and language but also facing prejudice and discrimination as well. Based on research done by Guilfoyle and Harryba (2011), Novera (2004), and UNESCO (2013), international student in Australia faced this treatment from the locals. It is reported that major barriers were the limited space to meet and develop friendship with the local Australians and no strong student community in the university for international student. This was the issue that SM faced earlier last year in 2021, when researcher still on the data collection phase. He shared that this issue was not the first time that happened to him,

SM: ..I faced challenges earlier this year, to visit my friend in his condo, the guard stop me from entering the condo because I'm not local. I need to call my friend and get me at the guard house then I can enter. I faced like this issue a lot..

In addition to the social and emotional upheavals brought on by social isolation, transitioning to a remote learning environment presents difficulties in terms of interaction with peers and teachers as well as in terms of studying (Jeliska & Paradowski, 2021). As for the sixth informant, SS from Sudan he shared that,

SS: ..in this pandemic situation right now, I can't say much. It is not easy in terms of academic, because I don't understand the modules were taught in the online classes..

LS: ..the support of my lecturers, staffs and classmates encouraged me to be who i am today. I was given opportunity. I was able to prove myself and know that i am capable. To speak in class, I will always ask and answer questions. All that help me outstanding in academic..

The academic expectations and requirements of the host country can be overwhelming for international students, leading to stress and anxiety. The different teaching and learning styles can also pose challenges for international students, who may be used to a different approach to education. According to Chavajay (2013), interactions with other foreign students tend to give international students a greater sense of social and emotional fulfilment than friendships with people from their host country, maybe because of their shared experience of feeling alienated.

According to study findings, students enjoy stronger social adjustment as they form friendships with local and international students (Ebinger, 2011; Rienties & Nolan, 2014). Universities can support initiatives that encourage the development of friendships between foreign students and citizens of the host country to help international students acclimatise to campus life on a social level (Ebinger, 2011).

While for JT, the eighth informant and SC, the ninth informant and MH the tenth informant, they shared similar experience,

JT: ..maybe the lecturers. They are really helpful. Also, the non-academic staff, they are very insightful..

SC: ..as i enrolled myself in LimKokWing, i was told that there will be a lot of practical engagement activities. Academically outstanding here would be the available resources for students. Such as, library and the lake for you to expand your ideas. Also, the lecturers here are very helpful. Whenever you need assistance in research, they will be quick and help you without hesitance..

MH: ..the lecturers here are definitely helpful as compared to the lecturers back in my country as i mentioned above. The resources here are systematic which make it the academic outstanding i would say..

The influence of university assistance on the wellbeing of international students was studied by Cho and Yu (2015). University support had a positive impact on two dimensions: it improved international students' happiness with college life and decreased their psychological stress. Comparatively to local students, who frequently engage with family and communities outside of the university, international students tend to feel less a part of the college community. In general, researchers discover that overseas students who receive university-based support tend to be more actively involved in college and identify more with a university (Cho & Yu, 2015; Glass et al., 2014; Zhang & Goodson, 2011). Mustafa and Ahmad (2019) highlighted that the friendly and encouraging nature of the local community has a favourable impact on the process of intercultural adaption. In addition, they feel a sense of acceptance and recognition from the community in the foreign environment, which helps to improve the entire process of adapting to different cultures.

c) Language Barriers

Language barriers are becoming one of the main reasons that contribute to the international students' issues. Even if English language would be the main language globally, but not all countries prioritize on learning English as their first language. This may cause some issues in some part of the countries. The international students suffer from lack of mastering English language in the academic structure; later can cause anxiety to the international students that went abroad for studying. According to Chen (1999), it is named as "second-language anxiety", where the students did not have self-confident to talk or to socialise with their own peers and this initiate the isolation among themselves. Many researchers studied on the influence of English proficiency on the academic and towards the social adjustment of the international students (Poyrazli et al., 2002). Now with the internalisation of the higher education, where opportunity to study abroad can get easily, research findings are continuously stating that the international students are still facing issues and challenges when they choose to study abroad (Rienties, Heliot, & Jindal-Snape, 2013; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008; Kondakci et al., 2008; De Vita, 2001).

English proficiency also will help the international students with both academic success and adaptation or adjustment with the host environment (Karuppan & Barari, 2011). Lack of English proficiency can lead to difficulties to understand and social interactions. According to Huang (2012), he indicates that to assist the student to reach their full potential,

the students need to have an internal and external support as well as mentoring. For instance, language barriers, not only can be the cause of the international students to experience loneliness and unsuccessful social adaptation but also towards the negative effect of the academic involvement and success (Bek, 2017).

AA mentioned about she does not master English language when she first came to Malaysia, she faces some difficulty in understanding English language and local slangs makes it hard for her to start any conversation at first and she usually seek help from her friends to translate it for her. Meanwhile, for CA from Germany, he does not face any issue to interact using English language, but he said that he has some difficulty to understand local slang when conversing in English. As for AK from Brunei, he does not face the language issue because he can speak Malay as the Malay language is similar with his home country, Brunei Darussalam.

AA: ..my friends help me to translate everything. And other parts also one of them is maybe like English or the Manglish difficulties. Because I just learn how to say, Hi, just like I can understand a little bit but I still cannot speak out, that time even I cannot compare like Malay language and English because they speak mixed..

CA: ..for 6 – 7 months, biggest one would be language, coz I don't speak the mother language..

OM: ..Malaysia is quite challenge for me specially for first two months. I need to prepare for my IELTS. English is not my language; I need to learn English to understand my study..

SM: ..almost 2 years, it was my first two months here living alone and I can't speak English, even I can't communicate. Later I enrolled myself to British Council to learn English. I take courses to improve my communication. From there I have new friends that similar from Middle East country..

During that time, he does not know how to communicate with locals due to language barrier, when researcher ask about his current situation, he said that:

SM: ..now a lot better, I can speak English well and can communicate with friends better and make friends from other country as well. I worked in the British Council last time, so I gain confidence to communicate now..

SC: ..I think language barrier is a huge gap for us to communicate as most of my classmates don't speak English. I mentioned earlier, I don't blame them for the language. For example, in my country, we speak 2 languages. one is Swahili, native spoken language. Once you enrol yourself to school, you speak English. What i wouldlike to highlight here is that English become our second language not first. Therefore, i don't blame them for not speaking well..

Language barriers can have a significant impact on international students' academic and social integration, leading to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and frustration (Wilson et al., 2017). Research has shown that language proficiency is a crucial factor in academic success,

with poor language skills leading to lower grades, limited participation in class discussions, and reduced academic confidence (Chen et al., 2015).

d) Covid-19 Experiences

Covid-19 or also known as Novel Coronavirus has been detected in Wuhan, China back in 2019. In the early of March 2020, Malaysia has been hit with its first Covid-19 case and since then Malaysian has been through a couple of lockdowns and the starting of closing of all offices, malls, small gathering was not allowed. The virus had caused all international borders closed and it causes panic moments globally. Covid-19 has caused fatality rate risen up to over 2.86 million at the end of March 2021 (World Health Organization, 2021). Individuals, families, organisations, and communities have been impacted by a variety major psychological concern during the crisis, including worry, loss, sadness, distrust, and panic (Asmundson & Taylor, 2020; Liu et al., 2020; Xiang et al., 2020). With the current situation of Covid-19, it has impacted our everyday lives and affects the global economy. Countries banned people from gathering to disperse and break the exponential curve. Many countries imposed strict standard operating procedures (SOP) to prevent the spread and control the situation (Harlem et al., 2020). This situation does affect the international students who studied in Malaysia. Higher Education Institutions (HEI) paused all physical classes and replaced with online learning method, this cause many of the international students went back to their home country and some of them, stay back and focus on finishing their last semesters, here in Malaysia. This pandemic has affected social, educational, emotional, as well as mental experience of the international students.

Recent researched done by Bardill Moscaritolo, Perozzi, Schreiber and Luescher (2021) stated that majority of international students were impacted greatly by the Covid-19 and huge amount of these international students are coming from Asian and Chinese students. The results of this research also mentioned that international students go through hardship in life such as financial, mental well-being and their inability to go back to their home country or back to campus.

AA: ..I really miss them a lot. Online learning also hard, right now I'm in my third semester, all online, tough but okay can manage. Group work okay because I have friend stay near so can work together, I have friend from Syria too, we always cooked dinner and I go to her house..

She also shared how her other international friends struggling with the financial issues.

AA: ..They face issues back home because parents cannot send money to them, so sad because they cannot eat, I sometimes help them..

The COVID-19 pandemic has also affected the financial situation of international students in Malaysia. Financial challenges are a significant concern for international students, who may face high tuition fees, living expenses, and limited access to financial aid (Raby, 2023). Financial constraints can lead to stress, anxiety, and hardship, affecting academic performance and well-being (Mamiseishvili & Rosser, 2010).

CA: ..Coping with Covid-19 quite okay for me as I live here with my parents but the challenges would be the online class and assignments..

SM: ..Covid-19 experience so far, quite tough when it comes to assignments, I have my other international friends here in my group and we can meet online to discuss, sometimes meet outside, but of course I miss my family back home. It's been a long time I cannot go back..

AK: ..it was quite scary that I would get myself in trouble alone in a country that is not my origin..

OM: ..I face problems during Covid-19 and I feel lost..I cannot focus and always missed my online class..

CONCLUSION

The literature review provides evidence that international students in private universities in Malaysia have faced various issues and challenges in the post-COVID phase from 2020 to 2023. The challenges faced by international students include academic, financial, mental health, social, and immigration challenges. Private universities in Malaysia need to develop comprehensive support services and resources to address these challenges, including financial aid, mental health support, language support, virtual social and cultural activities, and immigration support. By providing comprehensive support services, private universities in Malaysia can help international students overcome the challenges and succeed in their academic and personal goals. Social networks play an important role, as the students can have the access to the internet that can help the students to achieve better adjustment through the on-going connection with their family, friends, and peers, back home (Bartram, 2009; Lee et al., 2011). According to Lee et al. (2011), he found that the internet does not consistently smooth or block international student's adaptation, using it for the local social networking it can led to a better social adjustment. Bartram (2009) suggested that the need to form of regular personal tutoring and that can engage the students in cultural and social networking. Future studies could benefit from using a longitudinal approach to capture the changing nature of overseas students' academic adjustment in order to solve these shortcomings. To achieve a study population that is more representative, it is important to conduct inclusive sampling that encompasses a wide range of private universities, disciplines, and countries. Comparative investigations of private and public universities, as well as different academic levels, may uncover differences in academic adjustment experiences. Engaging in qualitative investigations focused on particular obstacles, such as linguistic obstacles or stress related to adapting to a new culture, would provide a more detailed comprehension. Intervention studies have the potential to evaluate the efficacy of support programmes, offering useful knowledge for university administrators and policymakers. Furthermore, the inclusion of qualitative components that capture the first hand perspectives of overseas students would augment the depth and genuineness of the research findings.

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