

## **A stranger in a strange land: Experiences of adjustment among international postgraduate students in Malaysia**

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Despite the ongoing globalisation of higher education, few studies have attempted to understand international students' adjustment experiences in non-Western institutions of higher learning. This study employed in depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the adjustment experiences of 10 international postgraduate students in Malaysia. Three themes and twelve sub-themes emerged from the interviews, including academic adjustment (academic experiences with English language, different teaching and learning approaches, experiences with student support services, and academic support), psychological adjustment (safety and peacefulness, loneliness, anxiety and stress, and homesickness), and sociocultural adjustment (perceived discrimination, language and communication challenges, personal friendships with local students, and culture shock). The theoretical and practical implications are outlined in regard to international students' expectations and experiences of living and studying in Malaysia.

### **Introduction**

In today's global neoliberal environment, international students are vital to universities and to host and source countries. The number of students selecting to study abroad continues to increase, with more than four million students choosing to study abroad in 2014, and it is expected that this number will double by 2024 (British Council, 2014). Gurúa (2009) envisaged that there may be as many as 7 million international students in higher education by the year 2020. More than 50% of international students studying in countries that provided statistics came from Asia. China, India and Korea sent the most, with the US, UK and Australia the most common destinations (OECD, 2014). Southeast Asian countries also play host to growing numbers of international students (QS World University Rankings, 2013).

The increasing number of international students has great socioeconomic influence for the welfare of home and host nations, as well as for the international education industry (Kumi-Yeboah & James, 2014). Apart from their role in providing income for universities, international students help to diversify the communities in which they study. The majority of them come from developing countries in search of higher qualifications, globally recognised credentials, and high-paying jobs when they return to their countries of origin (Maadad, 2014).

Past studies have been mostly concerned with the difficulties faced by students studying in foreign lands. With the tremendous growth in international higher education, more recent work has begun to look at the benefits and contributions studying overseas can have on students (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2015). Psychological adjustment is one of the ways

through which researchers have explored this topic by focusing on how students adjust to the challenges of studying in a foreign country. Despite the considerable work that has been done in this area, important gaps remain reflective of the most recent trends in international graduate education. The vast majority of studies on foreign student adjustment have studied students attending Western institutions of higher learning (Rienties et al., 2012). As such, language is often mentioned as a challenge for students coming from non-English speaking backgrounds.

The post-911 world has seen important developments in cross-national trends in graduate education. This period has seen larger numbers of students, particularly those from the Middle East and Africa, choosing to study in non-Western institutions of higher learning, including popular destinations like Dubai, Singapore, Japan, Korea and Malaysia (International Trends in Higher Education, 2015). However, there is a dearth of literature that has explored these new cross-national migratory patterns in graduate study. Few studies have looked at the psychosocial and sociocultural adjustment of graduate students - those from the East - studying in other Eastern universities, many of which are new at hosting foreign students. The majority of work in this area has looked at the experiences of students from non-Western countries studying in Western universities (Cho & Yu, 2015). These developments call into question the relevance of the existing literature on student adjustment, given its concentration on students studying in Western universities.

### **The current study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the adjustment experiences of international postgraduate students in their social and academic lives while studying at Malaysian public universities. This line of research - international student adjustment - has been vital for raising awareness of the issues faced by international students and the challenges tied to adjusting to a host country. Services for international students are developed at many universities on the basis of assumptions by staff and faculty members about the needs of international students rather than on a structured assessment of their needs (Deitchman, 2014). Thus, understanding adjustment among international students is vital to ensure that they obtain the best possible learning and living experience in their respective host environments. Furthermore, it is essential to expand the research base to include more qualitative studies to uncover first-hand adjustment experiences.

Previous studies were salient in identifying important variables, backgrounds, elements, and outcomes related to adjustment, and have led the way in providing greater clarity about multiculturalism on university campuses (Lee & Ciftci, 2014). Nevertheless, little is known about international students' experiences at universities in Asia. In depth interviews were undertaken to allow for a deeper understanding of the adjustment experiences of international students in Malaysia. This allowed us to probe with greater depth and go beyond what would have been possible using quantitative survey techniques. This approach complements the work of Erichsen (2011), who also used qualitative methods to understand adjustment experiences of international students.

## **Study context: International students in Malaysia**

Malaysia has become an attractive destination for continuing education (Cheng, Mahmood & Yeap, 2013). The number of international students coming to Malaysia in pursuit of higher education has grown considerably in recent years (Lam, Tong & Ariffin, 2017), which has translated into an increasing number of foreign fee-paying students. The reported number of higher education students in Malaysia has grown from 170,000 in 1985 to approximately 230,000 in 1990 and 730,000 in 2005. For international students, this number has grown from 30,000 in 2003 to 70,000 in 2007 (MOHE, 2011), and in 2010 there were approximately 90,000 studying in Malaysian universities. Most of these students have arrived from Southeast Asia, the Middle East, Middle Asia, and Africa, and Latin America. This figure is expected to increase to 200,000 by 2020 (MOHE, 2011). This significant rise has led to an increase in issues related to students' adjustment while studying at Malaysian universities.

International students, with their different sociocultural backgrounds have made Malaysian universities both diverse and multicultural. Such diversity demands that international students fit into the new environment and lifestyle of their host country. This adaptation has social, psychological and academic implications (Bailey & Phillips, 2016). International students often encounter distinct challenges in adjusting to a new cross-cultural environment, which can influence their academic achievement and psychological well-being. Previous research has explored the issues of culture shock, alienation, and isolation (Andrea, 2014). As these issues may impact newcomer psychological health, international students may face serious challenges related to their overall well-being.

In Malaysia, recent studies have identified several key indicators of adjustment that can be used to explain the psychological and sociocultural adjustment challenges many international postgraduate students face. They include: cultural differences; academic and life stress; financial problems; felt prejudice and bias; cross-cultural self-efficacy; social support; and interaction with Malaysians (e.g., Shafaei & Razak, 2016). These studies have further identified important gaps between the prospects of international students prior to undertaking their studies in Malaysia and their post-arrival experiences. This study aims to further our understanding of these gaps and address what is most critical toward helping international students adjust effectively to their new surroundings and achieve academic success.

## **Review of the literature**

### **Adjustment experiences of international students**

The notion that international students experience transition and adjustment problems is not new. In the 1960s, scholars studied the views, thinking, and social relations of international students (Selltiz et al., 1963). There are many ways to identify the problems associated with international student adjustment in universities. However, many scholars have written about this "adjustment" without having a common definition of it. Indeed, it

is a complex concept that relates to dynamic processes that ultimately lead to a good match between the individual and the setting (Ramsay, Jones & Barker, 2007).

The stage of a student's transition to a university reflects a separation from social patterns and cultural norms related to the experience, which in the behavioural pattern of the higher education context have not been recognised completely. Earlier studies mention that the adjustment experiences are influenced by several cross-cultural factors, such as accommodation and length of residence (Schartner, 2016). More recent studies have found that international students' adjustment varies according to home and host country (Akhtar & Kröner-Herwig, 2015). For example, students from countries in which English is taught can more easily adjust to the new English language environment than other students (Martirosyan, Hwang, & Wanjohi, 2015). The majority of studies in this area have categorised adjustment according to three types: academic, psychological, and sociocultural (Wang, Wei & Chen, 2015).

### **Academic adjustment**

Young and Schartner (2014) described academic adjustment as the capacity to adjust to university life, comprising the modes of learning and teaching at a host university. Academic adjustment implies ongoing improvement in learning and developing coping strategies aimed at achieving satisfactory academic progress. Academically, international students encounter many obstacles and challenges. For instance, Nayak and Venkatraman (2010) found that one of the main problems faced by Indian international students was in adjusting to a new academic system in Australia. Other researchers have also highlighted that academic matters are often the main source of stress among international students (Park et al., 2017).

A large body of literature has examined factors contributing to successful academic adjustment, including the strategies that international students use to achieve academic success (Glass & Westmont, 2014). The adjustment factors include language proficiency, learning environment, different teaching and learning styles, and different types of educational systems. In Novera's (2004) study on the academic experiences of Indonesian postgraduate students in Australia, the author found that Indonesian students perceived English language proficiency as one of the main challenges to academic adjustment. Similarly, Swami et al. (2010) found that adequate English language proficiency of Malaysian students in UK universities played a major role in facilitating adjustment to academic life while concurrently, other international students with low levels of English proficiency experienced greater difficulty with academic adjustment. In their study of international students' academic adjustment in Pakistan, Janjua, Malik and Rahman (2011) showed that academic adjustment was negatively impacted by a lack of understanding of academic and educational procedures, lack of direction with different teaching and learning styles, and difficulties in completing group work assignments.

### **Psychological adjustment**

Depression, loneliness, anxiety, anger, disappointment, and homesickness all play a part in personal psychological adjustment (Mesidor & Sly, 2016). Psychological adjustment is often described as psychological wellbeing or emotional satisfaction, the opposite of which can result in physical harm (Cho & Yu, 2015). In a study at the University of Tasmania, Yeoh and Terry (2013) found that participants experienced psychological distress such as homesickness, loneliness, and anxiety. Experiencing such difficulties can have significant consequences for overall psychological wellbeing. International students often have high expectations and experience psychological crises when their expectations are unmet (Li et al., 2016).

Psychological adjustment problems may be greatest at the outset of entry to university, as international students experience immediate life changes upon entry to a new cultural milieu. This is often exacerbated due to limited resources and lack of a social support, leading to negative psychological symptoms. Thus, evidence from previous systematic reviews on the psychological wellbeing of East Asian international students studying in Western universities concluded that the participants' psychological wellbeing was significantly linked to depression and stress (Li, Wang & Xiao, 2014). Lama (2013) found that Asian students studying overseas experienced psychological distress from numerous challenges they faced, possibly exacerbated by the fact that Asian students have been found to be more sensitive than Western students.

A handful of studies further explored the implications of poor psychological adjustment. Thurber and Walton (2012) found that when international students experience homesickness, anxiety, and psychological adjustment issues, they will consequently often withdraw from their course of study. Tochkov, Levine and Sanaka's (2010) study of Asian-Indian students in the United States revealed that homesickness and loneliness negatively influenced academic performance. Anxiety and depression were correlated with homesickness, and their findings showed that homesickness was more common in Asian-Indian students attending U.S. universities. Although much research has been conducted on the importance of psychological adjustment among foreign students, with many focusing on Asians, the vast majority have been conducted at Western universities.

### **Socio-cultural adjustment**

Socio-cultural adjustment denotes undergoing culture shock, bias, and involvement with novel standards, rules, norms, breaks, and traditions. It also refers to the aptitude to obtain and act on appropriate social and cultural skills to match the host culture. Unlike psychological adjustment, socio-cultural adjustment includes cultural learning and the attainment of social skills. According to Jamaludin, Sam and Sandal (2018), whereas psychological adjustment in the context of international education is influenced by individual coping strategies and personal empowerment, socio-cultural adjustment is often associated with learning a new culture, changing cultural identities, and enhancing intergroup relations.

International students experience many social challenges in adjusting to their new environments (Yan, 2017). Managing personal issues is more challenging in a student's host country than in one's home country due to a lack of social support from family, friends and social networks established over time. This situation can be buffered by positive social relationships in the host country, however. Studies indicate that social interactions with local students are a key to socio-cultural adjustment. When local students are not supportive or even disinterested in helping international students, socio-cultural adjustment can be negatively affected (Pedersen et al., 2017).

Another aspect of socio-cultural adjustment for international students is dealing with authority in host countries. In a study of international students in Malaysia, Alghail and Mahfoodh (2015) reported that international students often faced difficulties in dealing with people in authority. They found that the socio-cultural background of the international students led students to assume that university officers had the right to make essential decisions about the students' academic progression in the host university. Ippolito (2007) found that international students at a university in London experienced discontentment due to reports of neglect by instructors and administrative officers. The students felt their needs were not responded to, thereby affecting their socio-cultural adjustment.

Perceived discrimination has also been cited as an important factor influencing socio-cultural adjustment among international students. Lee and Rice (2007), in a study of international students in a research university in the south western U.S., found significant levels of perceived discrimination on campus. They concluded that such forms of neo-prejudice emphasising cultural difference as a basis of discrimination appeals to popular notions of cultural preservation of the host nation. Such experiences could influence international students' social interactions and skill development. Another study of international students in the U.S. showed that students often have trouble making friends with local students due to cultural differences (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Bonazzo and Wong's (2007) study of Japanese students confirmed that the interactions between international students and their local counterparts can lead to feelings of discrimination, which negatively affects the students' overall view of their educational experience.

## **Methods**

Much of the past research on international student adjustment has used quantitative methods. In light of this, we attempted to understand adjustment through a detailed inquiry into the individuals' experiences, rather than proving or refuting predetermined hypotheses (see Appendix for method details). Thus, the subject of this research was deemed more appropriate with a qualitative approach (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2015), offering direct access to the subjective experiences of international postgraduate students' adaptation.

### **Participants and procedures**

The research team interviewed international students to obtain a holistic view based on the context of the study and research questions. Using purposive sampling, postgraduate

students were invited, and interviews were conducted at the students' respective university libraries. Potential students were first identified by university lecturers, and snowball sampling was also used to identify additional study participants. The criteria for inclusion of participants in the study were: (a) participants had to be international, (b) they had to be studying in research universities in Malaysia, and (c) they had to be full-time postgraduate students with at least one year of studying experience in Malaysia.

Semi-structured, in depth face to face interviews were conducted with 10 students (Table 1). Prior to each interview, participants were notified that their participation in the study was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. To preserve the anonymity of the participants, pseudonyms were used for each of the interviewees. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and addressed issues related to the research questions (see Appendix for more information about the interview process).

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

No. and pseudonym	Gender	First language	Country of origin and first degree	Language of first degree	PG degree enrolment	Yr of enrolment	Discipline	Self-rated proficiency in English/ Malay	Age	M. status	Time in Malaysia
1 Majid	M	Arabic	Iraq	Arabic	Master	2013	Business administration	7/1	26	S	2 yrs
2 Aiken	F	Akan	Ghana	English	PhD	2013	Management	9/4	35	E	1 yr 4 m.
3 Adedayo	M	Hausa	Nigeria	English	PhD	2012	Human resources development	10/3	48	M	2 yrs 6 m
4 Maria	F	Persian	Iran	Persian	Masters and PhD	2009	Education	7/1	31	S	6 yrs
5 Arash	M	Persian	Iran	Persian	Masters and PhD	2008	Civil engineering	6/1	30	S	7 yrs
6 Najmeh	F	Persian	Iran	Persian	Masters	2007	Computer engineering	8/2	26	S	8 yrs
7 Ahmed	M	Arabic	Iraq	Arabic	PhD	2012	N/A	9/3	40	M	3 yrs
8 Simin	F	Arabic	Yemen	Arabic	Masters and PhD	2007	Biosciences	9/1	36	M	9 yrs
9 Dabria	M	Arabic	Yemen	Arabic	Masters	2015	Information technology	6/3	27	S	6 yrs
10 Alec	M	Spanish	Chile	Spanish	Masters	2015	Technology security	9/2	33	M	5 yrs

**Notes.** Self-rating of language proficiency score was selected from 1 to 10 (highest).  
 Marital status: S single; E engaged; M married.

Data were manually analysed using thematic analysis. After the interviews were conducted, the research team read the transcripts line-by-line, adopting an inductive approach to understand the participants' experiences and develop themes (Gratton & Jones, 2018). A constant comparative method was used to compare and refine the emerging themes in relation to the variant experiences of the participants (Ritchie et al., 2014). Given the dearth of literature exploring student experiences in Asian settings, an inductive approach was selected to develop the themes.

## Results

Analysis of the data revealed three major themes capturing the adjustment experiences of the study participants. These themes were classified through data analysis as: academic adjustment, psychological adjustment, and socio-cultural adjustment. Each main theme is further elaborated on through the identification of sub-themes, as shown in Table 2. Academic adjustment was defined by four types of experiences – learning differently, experiences learning in English, adjusting to student support services and university facilities, and academic support provided by supervisors and academic staff.

Psychological adjustment was described positively – such as feelings of safety, as well as negative feelings like loneliness, anxiety, stress, and homesickness, which affected the student's ability to concentrate on their work and their mental well-being. Finally, socio-cultural adjustment captures the social aspects of the students' adaption to the new culture, which included perceived discrimination, communication problems, new opportunities for friendships with local and international students, and culture shock. Each theme is discussed in detail below.

Table 2: Summary of themes

Theme	Sub-themes
Academic adjustment	Different learning approach Academic support – supervisors/lecturers Academic experiences with English language Experiences with student support service and facilities
Psychological adjustment	Safety and peacefulness Loneliness Anxiety and stress Homesickness
Sociocultural adjustment	Perceived discrimination English difficulties and communication problems Opportunities for personal friendship with local and international students Culture shock

### Academic adjustment

For the students in the study, academic adjustment was marked by the experiences and challenges related to the education process in Malaysian universities. Some students remarked on the differences between their home educational systems and that of Malaysia, including teaching and learning approaches. Compared to their countries of origin, several of the study participants commented that higher education in Malaysia uses a much more applied method of teaching and learning. Adedayo, from Nigeria, emphasised the importance of theoretical knowledge in his home country, whereas in Malaysia he observed that more value is placed on applied methods, where students learn by developing hands-on skills and undertaking practical methods. He said:

My country is not good in practice. And we have this type of technique in Malaysia. Unfortunately, in my country we didn't do any practice... this is the gap between us and Malaysian students. Maybe in theory we are good but we didn't do any practice before.

While it appeared that students valued these differences, they expressed concern over the absence of appropriate direction and knowledge to utilise them.

The participants expressed many sentiments about their academic experiences in Malaysia. While many enjoyed academic life, some expressed unpleasant experiences with supervisors. In the case of Maria, even though her experience with her second supervisor turned out to be helpful, the bond with the initial supervisor was challenging.

About how the supervisors... you know the male lecturers are better -- the female ones, most of my friends have problems. Some of my friends have female lecturers and faced a lot of problems so they changed their supervisors. They [lecturers] have a lot of knowledge, but they cannot explain to us. In my country, the lecturer has low knowledge but can explain very well. The female supervisors are very unpredictable.

The participants also discussed language ability and the differences between their experiences in their home countries' academic context and that of Malaysia. A number of students self-rated their English language skill levels as acceptable or excellent, revealing confidence in their abilities. Moreover, many of their prior experiences with English aided in adjusting to the new educational setting. On the contrary, Arash, from Iran, said that he suffered due to the language barrier in his first days after arriving in Malaysia but eventually overcame his difficulties. He commented, "When I came to Malaysia, I had trouble for almost seven months because I couldn't speak English and I also didn't go to English class in Iran."

Academic adjustment was also described by the study participants in regard to their experiences with facilities and support services in their universities. In general, the students were pleased with the diverse facilities offered. Some shared their views on the different support services – such as learning support services, health facilities, and international student centres. Arash commented:

There are a lot of good facilities here in terms of education. You have access to the library, the e-resources that the university has subscribed to, and you can take advantage of the opportunities for workshops and other things organised by the graduate school. So, there's a lot. I benefited from being in this academic environment.

However, some participants were dissatisfied with the service provided by the international office at their respective universities, as well as immigration policies regarding visas and legal documentation. Aiken stated:

It is hard because [in] some developed countries if you apply for a course, and if your course duration is five years, they will give you one visa to cover all five years. But here in Malaysia, we are subjected to be paying money every year to renew the visa.

## **Psychological adjustment**

For those students coming from war-torn countries like Iraq and Yemen, studying in Malaysia was described as a means to improve security, safety, and peacefulness, away from the problems in their home countries. As depression is often experienced during the process of adjusting to a new setting, in their interviews several international students expressed feelings of loneliness and separation, mainly in their first weeks after arriving in Malaysia. Compounding the difficulties of being away from family and not having peer support upon first arriving was the problem of communication; poor English skills made finding friends a challenge. This was reflected by Ahmed and Simin:

I lost my family. I was separated from all of them and I came all alone, it was really hard for me. That's why I got sad. Because at first I didn't have any friends. And even if I wanted to have friends my English wasn't good. You know. I wasn't confident to talk. That's why I was keeping my distance from people all the time.

When I started, like when I came to Malaysia, I was depressed. But after that I became better. Because I couldn't like ... I couldn't speak English. So, I didn't go to class. It was very hard for me. I couldn't understand what people were talking and saying.

Ahmed also expressed that being far from family in an unfamiliar setting could lead international postgraduate students to experience anxiety and stress. He stated, "At first it was really hard for me. I was never far from my family. And suddenly I was going to separate from them .... it was really hard for me."

Feelings of anxiety and stress also occurred for some students when they contrasted their experiences in Malaysia with those in their home countries. For instance, the Iranian students in the sample mostly expressed a sense of freedom and feelings of happiness while being in Malaysia. However, students from Africa tended to be more fearful, particularly in relation to speaking about politics or government affairs, for fear of being monitored by local authorities. They felt that there was more freedom of speech in their countries, as opposed to those from Iran. This apprehension carried over to their psychological adjustment. According to Adedayo:

In Malaysia, everything is monitored. Even your Twitter is monitored. So, you better be careful. And like I said earlier, I am here to get an education so I am seen as somebody just passing through so you should not get involved. I don't talk. I don't discuss about the issues with Malaysians or even with my own, the other international students because well, you never know who you are speaking with. So, it's that suspicion.

Some of the students also faced serious mental problems including bouts of depression because of homesickness, which made life very difficult for them. Majid was forced to use medication as a result of his difficulties adjusting to his time in Malaysia:

And I had a very, very bad time during that moment, during that time. So actually I visited a psychiatrist. I had some depression pills, anti-depression pills to calm me down. I couldn't sleep at night. And that was the biggest problem I had.

## **Socio-cultural adjustment**

Socio-cultural adjustment refers to the students' experiences that shaped or affected their social and cultural lives in Malaysia. For many, they were able to preserve their cultural practices and sustained positive relations with peers and with family and acquaintances. Others, however, reported incidents that caused unease due to perceived experiences of bias or discrimination. Several students experienced prejudice or racism from academic and non-academic staff as well as local students. Adedayo, from Nigeria, said:

Generally, you feel like an outsider when you are in Malaysia. And most especially when you are black, it is a bit more difficult when you go out. When you go to a shop, you are under observation. As soon as you enter as a black you have these people watching you throughout your walk through the store. It is very intimidating; it is very distracting.

Alec described his experience in Malaysia as "I think the society is a very closed society. You don't feel too comfortable... you don't see a lot of smiling faces." Most of the international students, however, managed the challenges. Some participants – especially those from African countries who had experienced discrimination and racism in Malaysia – felt less secure than they did in their home countries. Aiken stated that:

And I remembered an experience that actually made me cry. I went to the bank to withdraw money with my ATM card but it didn't work. My bank in Ghana had blocked the card. So, I tried like three times, and I observed that the security man had come to stand next to me, and was staring at me. And I was wondering why the card wasn't working because I've used it before. And the security man was just staring at me and thought I was doing something bad. So, when I left I felt very bad. I'm not a thief. I was just thinking to myself, I'm not a thief, and yet you walk around and people look suspiciously and [think you are] up to no good. I felt really bad.

Likewise, Adedayo said:

Dealing with administrators and officers is always surprising. You always expect the worst because when you enter the office they will deal with us differently, because you are an international. If you are from Singapore or Indonesia, the same language, the same region, then they will deal with you differently.

Communication was a major problem that students faced, beyond English proficiency. For example, Simin had considerable difficulty speaking English at first, causing a major barrier in communicating with her supervisor, along with others at the university including other service providers. But while on campus, she spoke of having to go out of her way to find someone that she could communicate with due to her inability to also speak the local Malay language.

The only problem I have is that when, for example, there's a group of Malaysians that are sitting and talking and they're speaking English it's okay. But suddenly they convert to Malay, then I cannot grasp... catch up with them.

In addition to difficulties with communication, several international students admitted that they had little interaction with Malaysian students. In terms of personal friendships with

locals, while certain participants fared better than others in their social interactions, many stated their displeasure about their lack of relationships with Malaysian students. They complained that most local students come to class and then leave, spending little time on campus with other students. Majid commented that

When we study together for one semester and became friends after that, we separate from each other. They completely end their relationship with us... like they don't know you anymore. Some of them.

The study participants also conveyed that their friendships with locals were often unintentional or restricted to the classroom setting, and not as strong as their bonds with those from their home countries. One student, Dabria, stated that:

In the class yes, we have local friends that sometimes we sit with, we communicate with, share our ideas and experience about doing the research. However, unlike our friendships with those from our home countries that care for each other, we have no intimate relationships.

Once exposed to the culture of the host country, the lack of positive interaction with local students can result in feelings of culture shock. (Brown, 2009). Culture shock refers to feelings of disorientation experienced when international students are suddenly subjected to an unfamiliar culture and surroundings. They might have certain expectations about the host country that might go unmet. For example, Najmeh talked about how different she found Malaysian culture as opposed to her own in terms of inclusiveness and social bonding. She said:

In terms of culture shock, yes, they don't greet people.... For me, it's how groups of people live and so you cannot judge them because that is how they are... so, it's just that they tend to be a bit different from yours, yes. So, way of life like I said, they are closed and so it is difficult for an outsider to integrate. Some of my friends came here they were shocked because of the change in culture and it was very difficult to acculturate themselves.

## **Discussion**

The present study investigated the adjustment experiences of international postgraduate students in the context of Malaysian universities. The data, collected through in-depth interviews, support the general contention that international student adjustment is dependant on students' transitional challenges (Boyer & Sedlacek, 1986). Analysis of the data resulted in three major themes describing the different ways that adjustment was experienced by the study participants, i.e. academic, psychological, and socio-cultural adjustment.

The results of this study indicate that international postgraduate students' academic adjustment to Malaysian universities was affected by the different learning approaches used, perceived academic support, communication, and experiences with student support services and facilities. Several of the students, particularly those from Iran, struggled

initially because of poor English language competency. Previous studies on international postgraduate adjustment have reported English language as a barrier for Asian students (Campbell & Li, 2008). In these studies, the language barriers prevented Asian students from communicating effectively with lecturers and other students, listening to lectures, following instructions, understanding assessment criteria and procedures, completing assignments, taking exams, and socialising with domestic residents.

Student supervision was an issue for several students in our study. While some who took part in research adjusted quite well to their universities due to the assistance they received from supervisors, others reported less satisfactory experiences. Those who had easier times adjusting reported that their supervisors in Malaysia were more available and welcoming compared to those in the students' home countries, and that their Malaysian supervisors inspired them to attain their educational goals. Others were explicit about the difficulties they faced. Indeed, the quality of research supervision is a major element affecting the quality of international students' adjustment. Positive feedback provided by supervisors can be a contributory factor to student satisfaction and has been linked to lower levels of student stress and anxiety (de Kleijn, Mainhard, Meijer, Brekelmans & Pilot, 2013). A lack of openness, different expectations regarding responsibilities of student and supervisor, lack of feedback and guidance from supervisor, and lack of communication, however, can result in negative adjustment for students (Adrian-Taylor, Noels & Tischler, 2007).

The findings further indicate that international postgraduates' psychological adjustment was described in terms of safety and peacefulness, loneliness, as well as anxiety and stress. Although few studies have explored psychological adjustment among students in Asian universities, some researchers (Singh, Schapper & Jack, 2014) have reported that Middle Eastern students in particular have safety motives for selecting Malaysia as place of study. The findings showed that for these postgraduates, Malaysia's reputation as a secure and safe country was vital. Students from war-torn countries specifically sought the secure study environment Malaysia offers.

Most of the study participants reported experiencing a certain amount of acculturative stress. Adjusting to a new community may be challenging for international students and can impact not only their psychological well-being but also their academic success. Our students reported acculturative stress due to perceived hate, discrimination, and culture shock. These findings mirror previous studies showing that acculturative stress was positively associated with depression in Taiwanese international students (Ying & Han, 2006), Korean international students (Lee et al., 2010) and other Asian international students (Constantine, Okazaki & Utsey, 2004) studying in Western universities. In contrast, Poyrazli et al. (2004) reported that European students tend to experience lower levels of acculturative stress as compared to Asian students in the United States because European students adapt more easily to the cultural norms of the United States. The current study findings are the first known attempt to report on postgraduate student adjustment of African students in Asian universities. The findings more closely mirror the experiences of Asian students studying in Western universities, reflecting a certain level of difficulty adjusting to the cultural norms and perceived discrimination.

A primary source of acculturative stress was due to homesickness. Numerous studies have shown that homesickness has an undesirable influence on educational success, and have established a close connection between homesickness and mental health problems in international students (e.g., Kegel, 2009). In addition, a lack of social system will have negative effects on students, especially from a psychological viewpoint, which is closely related to students' well-being. The negative effects include loneliness, which leads to self-isolation from the social system and, thus, depression (Behl et al., 2017). Indeed, a few participants in this study stated that they had faced certain psychological difficulties, such as loneliness and isolation, thereby confirming similar claims made in past studies (Gunn, 2005). In addition to language, friendships may contribute to adjustment to psychological problems such as homesickness and loneliness. The results support the argument that greater language ability assists in forming friendships with host peers and classmates, and thus aids socio-cultural adjustment (Swami et al., 2010).

Several of the study participants expressed dissatisfaction in their attempts to establish strong social ties with local students. To these foreign students, the locals often appeared aloof and even cold. According to Mahmud et al. (2010), however, this can be attributed to the Malaysian cultural values of shyness, constrained display of emotions, respect for others, and a collectivistic standard of living that is often interpreted by foreigners as aloofness. Thus, shy or respectful Malaysian students might be incorrectly perceived as unfriendly by international students, making communication challenging. Participant views on local friendships were somewhat divided, however. Other students expressed satisfaction with the support and welcome they received from local Malaysian students. Indeed, past studies have shown that friendships with individuals in the host country help to overcome socio-cultural challenges felt by international students (Brisset et al., 2010).

### **Implications for practice**

From a practical standpoint, the findings can inform senior university officers in identifying areas where adjustment is relatively low, to target international students who appear to be encountering greater difficulties in adjustment. In contrasting this study's results with previous studies, the experiences of a specific group of students (i.e. those hailing from a particular region) might differ from those of other groups. Consequently, suitable policies are required to deal with groups of students with different needs. Moreover, some students in the current study reported valuing the learning techniques of the Malaysian educational system. However, previous studies on African and Asian international students have revealed that these variances in academic values can also weaken the academic development of the participants (Evivie, 2009). Thus, understanding the unique learning needs of different groups of students is also needed.

While some students might experience acculturative stress, emotional distress, and educational challenges, their coping techniques – comprising social support and spirituality, among others – can reduce the stress linked to the experience of learning and living in a different society. Higher educational institutions in Malaysia should strengthen, or incorporate if needed, services that advance international student welfare and that make their transition less traumatic. It would also be beneficial for these universities to ensure

that students are well-informed about effective coping methods. Likewise, Malaysian universities should consider training for staff and students on understanding differences in cultural norms between international and local students. Yeh and Inose (2003) proposed that training workshops and cultural exchange groups promote a sense of community for international students. Such workshops might also provide international students with an additional source of instrumental social support by facilitating interaction among both international and Malaysian students.

In the interview sessions, several respondents stated that support services should facilitate excursions, social gatherings, or cultural celebrations that could provide occasions for shared compassion and social exchanges. The students felt that such increased interactions would reduce their homesickness, loneliness, and isolation. In addition, support services could play a fundamental role in encouraging friendships. Past studies have also highlighted the potential role of support services for designing special programs to promote social interaction for reducing loneliness, isolation, and homesickness among international students (Kwon, 2009).

Finally, participants in our study reported prejudicial or discriminatory experiences. Exposure to racial discrimination may increase these students' risk of developing or exacerbating mental health problems or concerns during the cultural adjustment process. Counsellors could educate these students about various forms of discrimination and oppression they may experience as a member of their racial group, along with ways to address this type of racism when encountered. This kind of psycho-educational intervention could be instituted in the form of an outreach program or a series of workshops. Furthermore, through racism awareness and cultural sensitivity programs, staff counsellors in academic environments could attempt to enlighten students, staff members, and faculty members about the undue effects of racism for international college students and even other marginalised students on campus.

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## Appendix: Method details

### Qualitative methods

Qualitative methods are useful for explaining - from the words of the participants themselves - the richness of detail embedded in the symbolic world of human experience, which inspires values, needs, and choices.

### Interview process

Interview questions were developed based on the study objectives and past literature on the topic. Prior to each interview, the researchers requested permission to audio record the session. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim with permission

of the participants. Interviews were conducted by two researchers assigned for the study data collection, while the other research team members were used for peer review purposes, reading over the data and results for possible bias and other threats to validity. Each participant was encouraged to speak honestly and openly and to clarify points of view on incomplete or ambiguous responses. Immediately following the interviews, classification and editing of field notes in relation to observations conducted during the interviews were carried out to supplement the interview transcriptions.

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