



Challenges and adjustment of international students in Malaysia: Pre-departure factors and post-arrival strategies

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Abstract

This study aimed to describe international students' challenges in Malaysia, types of challenges, and adjustment strategies. A face-to-face in-depth interview was conducted with twenty-five international students from seventeen different countries, registered at six Malaysian universities. The collected data was analyzed through qualitative content analysis, and results show four main challenges facing students, namely, language, food, climate, and academics. Additionally, the study presents the students' adjustment process, including three pre-departure factors that facilitate adjustment: Previous overseas experience, similarities in religion/culture, and prior knowledge about Malaysia. However, our findings will contribute to the existing literature on challenges and adjustment of international students in Malaysia, particularly, pre-departure factors which did not get much attention from researchers.

Keywords: International Students, Challenges, Socio-cultural adjustment, Higher Education, Malaysia, Coping Strategies

1.0 Introduction

The mobility of international students pursuing higher education has become an essential aspect of global education sector (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007), and keep increasing. In 2014, there were an estimated four million international students worldwide, and the number is expected to reach around eighth million in 2024 (British Council, 2014).

International students contribute culturally, socially, and economically to the host country (Terry, 2011), as a result, many countries came up with plans and policies to attraction many international students. However, the USA and the European Union dominate the share of global higher education, but internationalization of higher education turned into a global trend (Vidya & Gauri, 2014), and some Asian countries such as Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, Taiwan, and Malaysia, have become a higher centers by attracting many international students (Clark, 2015; Arokiasamy, 2010).

However, numerous factors influence international students' decisions to pursue higher education in overseas including intention to get modern education (Faleel et al., 2012), *discover new culture* (Yee & Mokhtar, 2013; Yusoff, 2011) and environment (Chuah et al., 2013).

As Malaysia became one of the fastest-growing higher education destinations (The Daily Sun, 2015), studies show International students are attracted by several factors, including culture, finance, and country's safety (Jusoh, 2017), the use of English as the medium of instruction (Singh, 2019), quality, and affordable education (Aziz & Abdullah, 2014), and the the excellent education system (Aziz, 2016). Many Middle-Eastern, African, and Asian students choose to pursue higher education in Malaysia, benefiting from the lower cost and cultural proximity between Malaysia and their home countries (Zeeshan, Sabbar, Bashir, & Hussain, 2013; Singh, Schapper, & Jack, 2016).

As Malaklolu and Selan (2011) pointed out, the number of international students choosing Malaysian as their education destination was rapidly growing since 1996. As Malaysia became a higher education hub, it attracted a growing number of international students (Yusoff, 2011; Pandian, 2008). To have their share of global higher education internationalization, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) started targeting to increase international students (Mohd Ismail & Doria, 2013; Yusoff, 2011).

In 2009, there were 80,750 international students registered in Malaysian universities (MOHE, 2009). As reported by The Malaysian Insider (2015), the Ministry of Education in Malaysia targeted 120,000 international students by 2015. However, in 2016, the number of international students enrolling in Malaysian public and private universities reached over 100,000 (Aziz, 2016).

Nevertheless, Malaysia became an attractive destination (Cheng, Mahmood, & Yeap, 2013), it



was ranked the 11th most preferred education destination in the world by (UNESCO), based on the number of students studying in the country (Talebloo & Baki, 2013). In 2016, Malaysia was listed in the top ten destinations (ICEF, 2016).

As Malaysia set a goal of welcoming 200,000 international students by 2020 (Yeoh, 2016), the number of international students in the country has grown significantly (Lam, Tong & Ariffin, 2017). For instance, in 2016 there were 135,000 international students in Malaysia, and the number significantly increased and 170,068 in 2017 (MOHE, 2018), from 135 different countries (Salihu, 2020; The Star, 2018).

As of 2019, Malaysia has 20 public universities, 47 private universities (Study Malaysia, 2020). Malaysian universities enrolled international students from various countries worldwide (Faleel *et al.*, 2012; Jamaludin, Sam, & Sandal, 2018; Rajab *et al.*, 2014), particularly, Middle Eastern and African countries (Yusoff, 2014), Pakistan, Bangladesh, and neighboring countries such as Indonesia and Thailand (Shafaei, Abd Razak, & Nejati, 2016).

2.0 Literature review

Several researchers have studied international students' challenges and coping strategies in the past (see Andrade, 2006; Olivas & Li, 2006; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Tseng & Newton, 2002). And more recently (Alsaifi & Shin, 2019; Li, Wang, Liu, Xu, & Cui, 2018; Kusek, 2015; Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016; Wu, Garza, & Guzman, 2015). They found common challenges include language barriers, food, climate, and social. Nevertheless, international students face many challenges when adjusting to new environments (Yan, 2017), including the educational system in the host country (Richards & Abdul Aziz, 2011; Lim, Yap, & Tee, 2011). And the inability to cope with such challenges leads to a stressful situation (Alghamdi & Otte, 2016).

In Malaysia, however, scholars also focused on international students, challenges, and adjustments (e.g., Yusoff, 2012; Trahar, 2014; Shafaei & Abd Razak, 2016; Singh, 2019; Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010). Cultural factors (Saravanan, Alias, & Mohamad, 2017; Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011), climate, language, and food (Ong, & Cheong, 2018; Mahmud *et al.*, 2010) constitute the most common challenges affecting international students in Malaysia.

Challenges faced by international students in Malaysia

GulRaihan and Sandaran (2017) revealed four key factors affecting international students' socio-cultural adaptation in Malaysia; language, academic, environmental, and interpersonal. Moreover, several researchers indicated other challenges, such as cultural, climate, and language (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Mahmud *et al.*, 2010; Naeeni *et al.*, 2015; Asgari & Borzooei, 2014).

However, language proved to be a significant obstacle faced by international students in Malaysia (Saravanan, Mohamad, & Alias, 2019; Ahrari *et al.*, 2019; Trahar, 2014; Mahmud *et al.*, 2010; Al-Zubaidi, 2012; Freeman, Nga, & Mansori, 2019). It hinders international students' adjustment (GulRaihan & Sandaran, 2017), and influences their academic activities (Mahfoodh, 2014). Lack of English language proficiency limits international students' ability to adjust to different dialects of local tutors increase their challenges (Mahmud *et al.*, 2010); for instance, the local English accent became an obstacle for international students (Thuraisingam & Singh, 2010), and consequently, affects their academic performance (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010).

Besides, climate difference is also a challenge for international students in Malaysia. Past studies show students struggle to deal with Malaysia's tropical climate (see Tuerxun, Hashim, Abdulla, & Khalid, 2020; Naeeni *et al.*, 2015; Mustaffa & Ilias, 2013; Thuraisingam & Singh, 2010; Lian, 2011; Asgari & Borzooei, 2014). Similarly, Mahmud *et al.* (2010) conducted a focus group of international students in Malaysia and found a similar result; the weather was one of the problems students complained. Furthermore, Caroline's (2012) study also indicates that climate adjustment challenges as hot weather and heavy showers restrict students' activities.

Numerous researchers on international students in Malaysia found the food is one of the significant difficulties students complained (see Movahed, Mokhtar, & Hassan, 2019; Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011; Mahmud *et al.*, 2010; Tuerxun *et al.*, 2020; Naeeni *et al.*, 2015; Mustaffa & Ilias, 2013; Baharak & Roselan, 2013). Students stated they couldn't get their favorite food (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2010). And they had difficulties eating local food (Wan, Md Nordin, & Razali, 2013), especially in their first year, due to spiciness or sweetness (Thuraisingam & Singh, 2010; Lian, 2011).

Furthermore, academic differences pose a major challenge for international students in Malaysia (Alghail & Mahfoodh, 2016; Yuen & Mussa, 2015;



Saazai, Melor, & Embi, 2014; Abdulkareem, 2013. A study by Malaklolunthu and Selan (2011) revealed that students also faced academic adjustment problems besides the language and food.

3.0 Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative method to understand adjustment constraints faced by international students in Malaysia, the pre-arrival factors that facilitate their adjustment, and post-arrival strategies they use to cope with the challenges. This method lets participants to explain their experiences of adjustment, and allows researchers to obtain sufficient information.

Data collection

An in-depth interview has been conducted with twenty-five international students from seventeen different countries across the world. Before the interview, respondents were informed of the study's objective, and the information they provide would be confidential, which will be used for academic purposes only. In addition to that, students were provided consent forms to sign if they agree to participate in the study.

Participants

Interviewed students are from Africa, the Middle East, and South/Central Asia, and they are registered under five Malaysian public universities, and one private university, namely Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM), Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP), Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Malaysia (UIAM), and Multimedia University (MMU).

Participants were interviewed on respective campuses of their universities, except few off-campus residents. The interview was conducted in

English, and students were asked more about the elements of culture, language, climate, and adjustment. Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed, and to ensure the participants' confidentiality; we used pseudonyms instead of their real names.

4.0 Results

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Country	Frequency
Yemen	2
Nigeria	2
Uzbekistan	2
Somalia	2
Palestine	2
Indonesia	2
Egypt	2
Syria	2
Cameroon	1
Libya	1
Bangladesh	1
Eritrea	1
Jordan	1
Sri Lanka	1
Saudi Arabia	1
Pakistan	1
Sudan	1
Total	25

Table 2. Education level of participants

Degree	Frequency	(%)
PhD	2	8
Master	7	28
Bachelor	16	64
Total	25	100

Table 3. Universities of participants

University	Type	Number of students
Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM)	Public	8
Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka (UTeM)	Public	1
Universiti Malaysia Perlis (UniMAP)	Public	6
Universiti Malaya (UM)	Public	5
Universiti Islam Antrabangsa Malaysia (UIAM)	Public	4
Multimedia University (MMU)	Private	1

Main challenges

Language

Based on the data we gathered, language challenge occurs in two occasions: When students are dealing with ordinary local people, and when communicating with lecturers. The language barrier between local people and international

students is a significant adjustment challenge; it occurs when students are dealing with the public, such as ordering food, or buying groceries at local shops, due to local people's inability to speak proper English.



Communication with public

“Malaysians are friendly, but they afraid of us because of the language; they can’t speak English” (Ahmed, Egypt).

“In general, it is hard to go with local, i do not know maybe they don’t like to speak English, because i know when i go with them, they want to go with me, but the problem with the language, they don’t like to speak in English” (Hashim, Syria).

“It’s nice to interact with the locals, but the locals look shy to talk to the internationals, first time you want to talk to them, they don’t want to respond because of lack of English or lack of communication, so how would you gain something from someone that is not willing to converse with you?” (Victor, Nigeria).

Language barrier hinders communication between international students and local people due to the fact that there is no common language between them.

“It took me six months to interact with local people because i could never understand, i think the problem is mostly the language so as long they don’t know English, and i don’t know Malay, that is the biggest problem; we don’t have anything in common to talk about because if we can’t understand each other, i don’t think there will be a way to interact with the people” (Sharif, Somalia).

Despite many participants complaining lack of communication, some of them revealed it was even more difficulty outside big cities.

“Actually, the difficult thing to adapt is the language, here is hard especially when you go out of KL it is hard to find someone who can speak English, so this is the main difficulty here” (Hashim, Syria).

Academic and language

Students have difficulties in communicating with academicians, and they mentioned they could not understand local lecturers’ English accent.

“Actually, the education here in Malaysia is very good, and the facilities very good also, but the problem is like my lecturers speak English in Malaysian accent, that is the problem maybe they can’t speak English or a little bit they should explain in Bahasa Melayu, all when we are talking

in English i will not understand because i can’t understand the accent, maybe they cut the half of the word” (Salem, Palestine).

“Yeah it’s not easy, when I came here I entered English intensive course, so I adapted the lecturer’s pronunciation before it was very difficult, but now it’s easy to understand” (Yusuf, Libya).

“For the first semester, i was like, i can’t follow up the lecturer, some of the class i don’t actually have any idea what he is saying even though he is speaking English. But yes, time after, day by day, because when i was studying English most of them, they talk British English, British Council and ULS, when i came here i meet Malaysia accent lecturers” (Ayman, Yemen).

Food

Food poses a significant challenge for students; most of the participants reported that they have food adjustment issues, mainly due to the lack of variety and Malaysian cuisine itself.

“The basic thing is the spicy they use, it is very hot and killing my tongue, so actually, i try to manage but i couldn’t so i choose some food that doesn’t have spices and also i was make a deal with the one who do cooking...For God sake a little bit...so not too much” (Hashim, Syria).

“I can say so first about the food, mostly the food is spicy, and in my country, we are not used to eat spicy, so I wasn’t able to get along with it” (Salah, Egypt).

Some students didn’t use the spicy food, and as a result, didn’t have a pleasant experience once they first tried.

“It caused me gastric actually eating this spicy food, i had to see doctor about my gastric, they had to put in operation, i had very difficult moment about the food, and it was really so painful because the food i used to eat was different, everything was different, i had to see doctor, and the doctor told me i have to stop eating spicy food, so i have to start eating none spicy food which is really very rare and difficult to find in Malaysia” (Sharif, Somalia).



Some students complained about rice being the only or most popular food available at the local restaurants.

"The food is totally different. Malaysia they eat only rice, for my country we have different food for three different times of eating, for example, breakfast we have bread with honey and cheese, for lunch we have rice with chicken and fish and beef, for dinner chapatti same like Indian food, not heavy food" (Abdalla, Yemen).

"I saw people eat rice in the morning, this is big different. In our country there is different food, everything different in the first time, I have shock, but after few months I try to interact with the people, and I eat, no problem" (Tareq, Jordan).

Climate

Weather is also another issue, but it does not affect all students. Some of them are from tropical countries with similar weather as Malaysia, but other students experienced challenges.

"The weather is big different because there is raining and very hot just, I think Malaysia is one season, but in Jordan, there is four-season" (Tareq, Jordan).

"Actually, i came from Palestine, the weather in Palestine; we have four seasons. Malaysia i think one season or two seasons like that hot and super-hot that made me angry or annoy, i don't like the hot weather because in Palestine like the maximum degrees like 25, 20 and that good for me when i came to Malaysia i feel very hot, actually, i don't like hot weather, actually the first six months in Malaysia it is difficult, but after that it is ok" (Salem, Palestine).

"We have four seasons and all the things and, we don't have that sunny weather" (Hashim, Syria).

"The weather is not good here, the weather in my country is much better because here all the time the weather is same it's hot only" (Hamid, Pakistan).

5.0 Adjustment

The adjustment process is classified into two. First, we describe pre-arrival factors that facilitate students' adjustment, and then we present other strategies students use to cope with challenges. Both are discussed as follows:

Pre-arrival factors

Previous overseas experience

The interviewees emphasized that having prior experience of living abroad can often be useful in adjusting to foreign countries.

"I traveled a lot; I have been into Europe, I have been into many parts of Asia, Africa, it totally helps" (Fahad, Saudi Arabia).

"I have been in Thailand and China, i think it helps a lot, because it's where we teach our selves somehow like you know when i go to China, and i will like ...ow this condition, so next time if i travel somewhere i will feel like this, but it will not be culture shock happening to me" (Anisa, Indonesia).

"...of course it helps, why not? I have been more than fifteen countries before. For example in last holiday i have been in Indonesia, i have lived there around three weeks, so the culture is not much difference between Malaysia and Indonesia, so i may say experience of Malaysia helped me in Indonesia" (Kurbanov, Uzbekistan).

Prior knowledge about the country

Prior knowledge about Malaysia was a decisive contributing factor to some students' adjustment.

"I can't say that i was shocked because before i came here, i tried to get more information about Malaysia, i knew what i am going see here and i talked to many people, and they explain to me how Malaysians are and i Google, so i was not shocked" (Ali, Cameroon).

"You know i'm civil engineer, so i look at the documentary about KLCC tower, so i have basically what is going to be there, it's very easy to research on any culture you want to go to or any country you want to go to, there is no main shock for me. Media give the general overview also" (Hashim, Syria).

Similarities in Religion and culture

Muslim participants revealed religious similarity facilitates the general adjustment process.



"We have some similarities because my culture is actually influenced by Islam as well, so we value too much Islamic beliefs and everything, and i see many things similar here in Malaysia with Malay people" (Ali, Cameroon).

"In Malaysia i didn't suffer that much, Malaysia is Islamic country, religion influences mainly in their culture" (Fahad, Saudi Arabia).

"In terms of religion its good place for Muslims who want to come, everywhere you will find Masjid" (Yusuf, Libya).

"I think there is no much different between our culture and Malaysian culture because we are all Muslims and we have a lot of similarities between them and us" (Mustafa, Syria).

"...Malaysia as i told you not big different because they are Muslim country in general" (Tareq, Jordan).

"...this is one of the factors, the majority they are Muslims, so that it is easy for you, one of the things of before you go out of the country is the religion, if you are going to Europe you be like worried about how i am going to pray and where, and how difficult is it to, how easily, but here Masjids are everywhere, Surau everywhere, so it was one of the factors" (Ayman, Yemen).

Post-arrival strategies

To adjust the overall challenges, students use various strategies to facilitate their adjustment, such as being flexible and open-minded.

"Be open-minded and open-hearted, be ready to accept any information comes to you if it's bad or good and with this strategy, you can move on with your life" (Hamid, Pakistan).

"To adapt, you should have a lot of Malaysia friends to help you, if you get any problem you should ask them maybe" (Salem, Palestine).

"To mix with local you will have more information, more involvement in their lives, deeper understanding of their culture, mostly in my opinion there should

be mixing to adapt faster" (Kurbanov, Uzbekistan).

"I believe interacting with them helps you understand the language, learn the language, learn the culture because when you don't talk with the people, you don't know really what they are, what they capable of but when you talk to them interact with them, make friends with them, play football with them, it makes you easier to understand and learn about the culture before i had Malaysian friends what i believed and what i believe now is different" (Sharif, Somalia).

"If you are in a foreign country you already know that you are going to face challenges with a foreign culture, but if you make the attempt to understand what is foreign to you, it becomes easier, once you understand something that strange you don't this doubt or this misjudgment about people, once you understand why they are the way they are it makes easier for you to interact with them and find a way to interact with them even though they are the way they are" (Bilkis, Sri Lanka).

Flexibility is a key for adjustment as interviewees revealed.

"The first thing is you don't keep judgments in your head before you talk to them, give them the opportunity to get to know, a lot of us do make pre judgments because of the things that we are told, so if you already have like these things in your head it is going to prevent you from adapting" (Bilkis, Sri Lanka).

"Everywhere you go, you need to learn a lot about the place, even the language, even the culture, even the traditional way how to deal with them" (Ahmed, Egypt).

"Just learn how people live, don't be so stuck in your own ways in your own culture, just be accepting and understanding of how the local people behave and also try to learn their language, eat their food, make friends with locals" (Putri, Indonesia).

Discussions and conclusions

The research aimed to study the adjustment of international students in Malaysia, the types of



challenges they face, and adjustment strategies. An in-depth interview has been conducted with twenty-five international students from seventeen different countries across the world. However, we found that international students in Malaysia face several challenges, such as food, climate, language, and academic. Students use different strategies to cope with the challenges. Some of them seek help from local people as they create friendships to learn more about Malaysia. Some others pointed out that flexibility and open-mindedness are essential

strategies that could facilitate the adjustment. However, the study also found pre-departure factors help students to adjust. For instance, students who share a similar culture with Malaysia are more likely to deal with challenges. Those who have overseas living experience tend to go through an easier adjustment process. Moreover, some other students learn more about Malaysia through seniors in Malaysia or online, which provides them pre-arrival knowledge about the country.

6.0 References

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