

Acculturative Stress Among International Students: A Case of Malaysian Universities

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ABSTRACT

Globalization of education is not uncommon in many countries where international education is of major importance to many, including Malaysia. Malaysia has increasingly become a popular destination for study pursues recently due to various attributes such as the wide verbal implementation of English by the locals, affordable accommodation cost, unique traveling experiences, and great opportunities offered at Malaysian higher learning institutions. Globalization of education develops a proactive global learning environment for local students. When international students come to Malaysia, they must adjust rapidly and learn fast, coping academically and socially. This study aims to assess the acculturative stress experienced by international students in Malaysian public universities. The findings indicate that most international students are under moderate cultural pressure, especially cultural changes or shocks, language barriers, and anxiety. These findings have

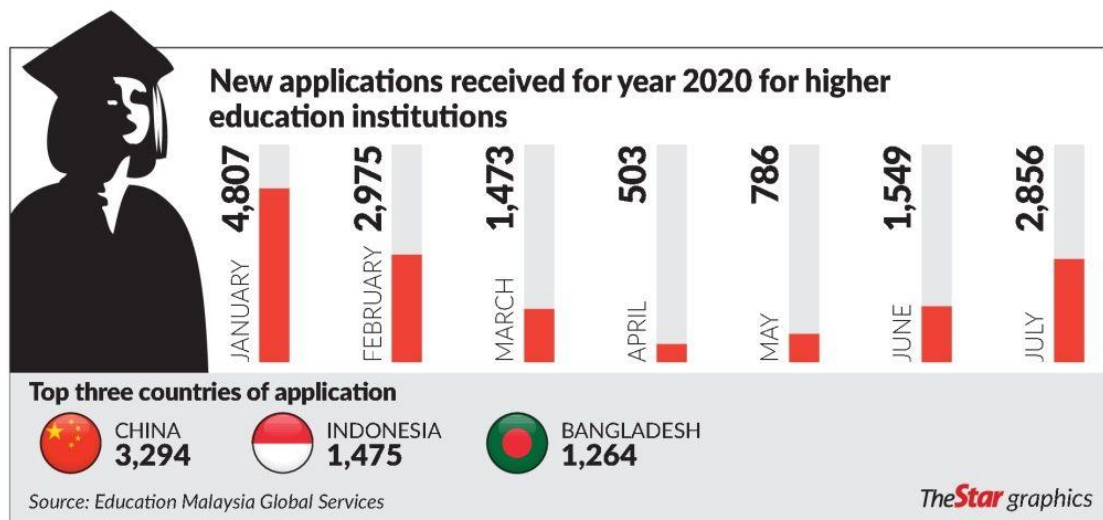
implications for research on stress and cultural change for international students.

Keywords: Stress, International Students, Cultural Change, Public Universities, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

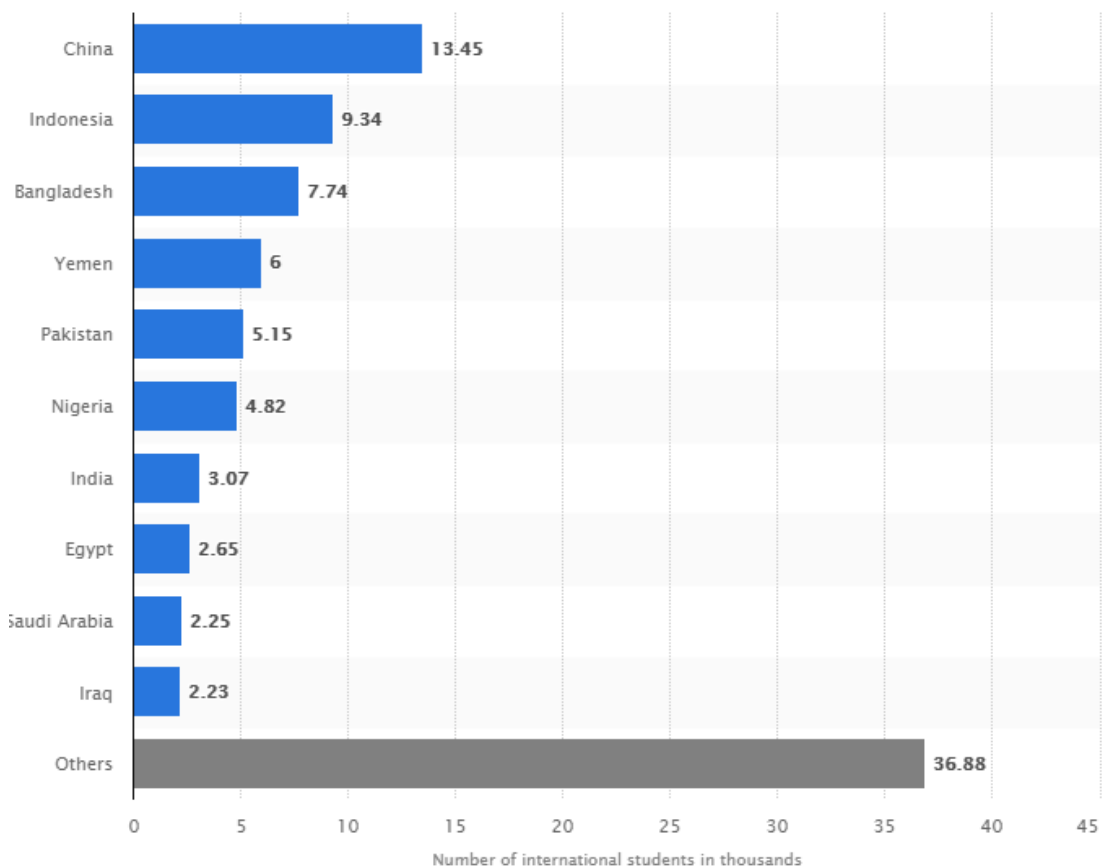
The Malaysia Higher Education Blueprint 2015–2025 envisions welcoming 250,000 international students by 2025. Approximately 130,110 international students were engaging with Malaysian higher education in 2019 from 136 countries, mainly Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Globalization of education is not uncommon in many countries where international education is of major importance to many, including Malaysia. Malaysia has increasingly become a popular destination for study pursues recently due to various attributes such as the wide verbal implementation of English by the locals, affordable accommodation cost, unique traveling experiences, and great opportunities offered at Malaysian higher learning institutions. Globalization of education develops a proactive global learning environment for local students. When international students come to Malaysia, they must adjust rapidly and learn fast, coping academically and socially. This study aims to assess the acculturative stress experienced by international students in Malaysian higher education. Figure 1 shows that 14,949 international students have applied from January to July 2020 to enroll in Malaysian degree programs. The majority of the international students are from China, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. Figure 2 illustrates the number of international students learning in Malaysian universities in 2019.

Figure 1. New Application by International Student in Malaysia (January to June 2020)



Source: The star (2020)

Figure 2. Number of International Students Studying in Higher Education Institutes in Malaysia (2019)



Chia and Kee (2017) reported that a knowledge gap on stress remains a hot topic of interest for academics and practitioners. Stress is a serious issue affecting lives and makes people nervous, chronic anxiety, and increases their tension in emotions, thought processes, and physical conditions (Motoda & Kimbal, 2020; Teoh et al., 2021). In the workplace context, an employee's experience of more stress at work produces work-family conflict, and consequently, it increases his or her intention to quit the organization (Rubel et al., 2017). In comparison, stress has become an unavoidable psychological and emotional factor affecting international students' academic performance in the higher education context. Living and studying in a new environment and culture can sometimes be a joyful experience. The new environment and culture may impact socio-cultural, environmental, and physiological changes and emotional adjustment. While studying abroad, international students most often face many obstacles (Berry, 2005). International students may experience stress-related emotional instability, helplessness, segregation, insignificance, and emotional imbalance during the assimilation and adaptation process. Several factors influence international students' acculturation. International students bring a broad approach to learning from various disciplines,

contributing to their host country's technical expertise and widening the working population. On the other hand, studying abroad introduces many potential challenges, and international students may experience the socio-cultural pressure and stress of their life transitions during the adaptation process and emotional difficulties.

Local researchers (Aljaberi, Juni, & Shahar, 2018; Alavi & Mansor, 2011; Malaklolunthu & Selan, 2011) documented international students' problems and needs in Malaysia. International students face learning and academic challenges in Malaysian universities, such as environmental and language barriers. The more problematic issue for international students is getting accustomed to their changed surroundings, particularly their host region's different cultures. Some difficulties entail harsh living conditions, a diversity of diets, an unfamiliar environment, cultural values and beliefs, and exhausting interplay with current students and destination environments. Such stressors may induce a type of stress known as acculturative stress, categorized as psychological and physical pressure encountered by a person in a new cultural setting. It has been stated that there is a significant link between high levels of strain faced as a result of global students plus declining well-being environments and smoothes further severe healthiness issues (Gupchup, Borrego, & Konduri, 2004). A lack of social relationships and economic support, as well as stress, might cause international students to experience agitation, depression, and physical illness, which may impact their academic achievement (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Acculturative depression has a conflicting relationship with social reinforcement. Positive acculturation was negatively associated with acculturative stress (Shields, 2001).

Scott et al. (2015) suggest that stress can cause mental illness, negatively affecting cognitive performance and learning. It might affect students' overall results, enhancing their regular performance. Stress has been connected to social and academic tension, and it can lead to stressed behavior, irritation, rage, and depression. Most international students were able to assimilate to the new environment and culture by developing trust and getting support, which helps them become socially and mentally secure. Chia and Kee (2017) argued that perceived organizational support might help to relieve stress. One potential challenge faced is that the language barrier may lead to stress, apprehension, and depressive disorder among international students worldwide (Ibrahim, 2013). The stress level within and between international students is rising, particularly during the pandemic. Overall, the goal of this paper was to gain a deeper understanding of the acculturation and adaptation issues encountered by international students at Malaysia's leading public university, which has the maximum range of international students in the country. More academic research into international student criteria is required to help learners attain and succeed in higher education institutions (Qasem & Baharun, 2010).

Furthermore, international students' literature related to stress is rather limited in the context of Malaysia. This paper is part of the Nusantara Worldwide Collaboration project organized by the Association of International Business and Professional Malaysia (AIBPM). This paper aims to examine the stress experienced by international students in one of the leading Malaysian public universities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysia is a country full of diversity and culture and one of the most popular tourist destinations globally. Malaysia is also one of the best countries with a healthy international student experience (Instarem, 2018). So there are good reasons to study in Malaysia. Malaysia is quickly becoming a favorite of international students with world-class education standards. Malaysia can be a wonderful experience because students can enjoy many benefits, including cheap living, cultural and food diversity, and even climate (Excel Education, 2021). One disadvantage is that there may be a psychological struggle between wanting to study abroad and fear of change, leading to cultural adjustment pressures. Moving and learning in distant countries can be challenging, and this decision can shape the future.

Acculturation is defined as assimilation to different cultures, and it is part of cultural change, which is the result of repeated direct contact between two different cultural groups (Berry, Kim, Minde, & Mok, 1987). Berry and colleagues list several possible changes. When studying in the host country, replace the characteristics of one culture with the characteristics of another culture. International students come from different countries and bring their cultural characteristics. An international student may be confused by the cultural differences between their and Malaysian cultures, affecting their goals, beliefs, feelings, and motivations. In addition, new cultures often challenge the beliefs and values of international students, and they need to consider different ways of thinking and behavior when adapting to their own needs or a new environment.

Based on Chia and Kee (2017)'s findings, the researchers propose that support allows international students to learn about new cultures. This paper also examines if international students in Malaysia adapt to the new environment. Can international students in Malaysia adapt to the pressure in an unfamiliar environment? Therefore, this paper aims to understand the primary acculturative stress among international students in Malaysia. This paper also investigates socio-cultural and demographic factors as predictors of cultural adaptation pressure. Based on the interviews with the international students in Malaysia, the researchers summarize the common acculturative stress faced by international students.

Common Acculturative Stress among International Students in Malaysia

Culture shock

The Malaysian government supports cultural diversity through internationalization. International students reported that they experienced differences in terms of climate, food, social values, lifestyle, behavior, language, and non-verbal communication. International students experience stress when studying abroad. They felt uncertain, anxious, and lost in an unfamiliar and unsettling environment during the first three to six months. Some of the international students admitted that they felt homesick.

Language barrier

Communication comprehension ability is one of them where international students usually have difficulty communicating in a second or foreign language. Some international students have difficulties communicating in English in the academic context. Some international students reported feeling anxious, afraid of negative comments, public speaking in English class, presentations, and tests.

Fear

The interview responses highlighted that fear is the third acculturative stress encountered by international students in Malaysia. Fear might be a sense of insecurity in unfamiliar surroundings and a combination of other acculturative

stress. The common fear experienced by international students in Malaysia includes social isolation and loneliness and the loss of proximal family and social connections. Some international students reported not having the support or connectedness as local students. For example, some do not have family in Malaysia to seek advice; some face financial and housing problems, and some may encounter visa requirement-related issues. A minority of them admitted that they experienced some forms of bullying, racism, hatred, and discrimination.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study examines the acculturative stress experienced by international students in Malaysian universities. In light of the above, the unit of analysis for this study is at an individual level: the individuals who are international students currently studying in Malaysia public universities, as mentioned earlier.

Sample size and procedure

The sample in this study was international students who study in a Malaysian university. The data was collected between April and May 2021. The questionnaires were distributed to international students via soft copy by researchers with the aid of Google form. The information collected is meant for academic and research purposes. The minimum number of sample sizes required for the research is 100 to run SPSS. The online questionnaires were distributed to 150 international students in Malaysian public universities. Of these 150 surveys, 100 international students participated in this study with a response rate of 67%.

Sampling Technique

In sociology and statistics research, snowball sampling is a nonprobability sampling technique. Given the conditions set for selecting participants to form the survey sample of this study, the snowball sampling technique was employed. Such selection was used as the main purpose of this study is to examine the study variables from the international students' perceptions in Malaysian public universities. The international students were asked to invite their international students studying in Malaysian public universities to complete the online survey.

Research approach

There are two types of research methods: quantitative and qualitative methods. Qualitative research is mainly about words, focusing on non-statistical tools and methods for analyzing data. Quantitative methods are about numbers, usually including statistical tools and methods for data. The research methods of our project use mixed methods, including quantitative and qualitative (interview) analysis, to better understand acculturative stress among international students.

Measures

The study has used a survey method for data collection through Google form as one-to-one interaction was not possible due to the pandemic. The study employed a five-point Likert scale questionnaire denoting "1" as "strongly agree" and "5" as "strongly disagree". It is a 27-item scale consisting of culture shock (eleven items), language barrier (three items), fear (nine items), and acculturative stress (four items).

Statistical data analysis

Data collected from the questionnaire were entered into SPSS (Statistical Software Package for Social Science). SPSS was used to analyze all the data obtained from the questionnaire. Further analysis is done to test the validity of the findings. Data analysis techniques such as factor analysis, reliability analysis, descriptive analysis, multiple regression analysis, and other techniques were used to test the validity and reliability of the data collected.

1. **Goodness and correctness of Data entry**

This shows how good the scales can be used to check all the data collected from respondents. It examines data accuracy by using the minimum, maximum, and count under descriptive statistics. The variance, range, standard deviation, and mean examine the respondents' responses who react to the questions in the questionnaire.

2. **Reliability**

Reliability is a measure of consistency. If the results obtained are repeated continuously, the test is considered reliable. Cronbach's Alpha is a common method to measure internal consistency reliability. Cronbach alpha values of 0.7 and above are considered reliable. This indicates that the elements are homogeneous, and measurements of the same structure indicate that an alpha value of 0.5 will be considered the lowest acceptable value.

3. **Descriptive analysis**

The mean and standard deviation was performed to analyze the respondents' responses to acculturative stressors and stress. The function of the descriptive analysis is to know about the profile of the respondents. It is also used to determine the variables that will influence stress.

4. **Regression analysis**

Regression analysis evaluates the relationship between two or more independent variables and the dependent variables.

RESULTS

Table 1. Respondent's Demographic profile (N=100)

Variable		Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	57	57
	Female	43	43
Age	20-25 years	73	73
	25-30 years	16	16
	Above 30 years	7	7
	Below 20 years	4	4
Religion	Buddhist	37	37
	Christian	24	24
	Hindu	23	23
	Muslim	16	16
Marital Status	Married	17	17
	Single	83	83
Country of Origin	America	1	1
	Australia	1	1
	Canada	2	2

	China	35	35
	India	26	26
	Japan	10	10
	Pakistan	12	12
	Thailand	5	5
	United Kingdom	8	8
Length of Stay in Malaysia	Less than 1 year	4	4
	1 year	21	21
	2 years	34	34
	3 years	13	13
	4 years	11	11
	5 years	9	9
	More than 5 years	8	8
Degree	Bachelor	80	80
	Doctorate	5	5
	Master	15	15
Study Stream	Art	25	25
	Commerce	48	48
	Science	27	27
Year of Study	1 year	9	9
	2 year	32	32
	3 year	34	34
	4 year	11	11
	5 year	14	14
First Language	English	14	14
	Chinese	4	4
	Hindi	15	15
	Japanese	10	10
	Mandarin	30	30
	Marathi	1	1
	Tamil	8	8
	Thai	5	5
	Urdu	13	13

Table 2. Reliability Analysis

Variables	No. Items	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha
Culture shock (e.g., new culture challenge, homesickness)	11	3.61	0.79	0.82
Language barrier	3	3.11	0.85	0.70
Fear (e.g., discrimination, perceived hatred, financial challenges)	9	2.85	0.88	0.67
Acculturative stress	4	3.56	0.68	0.72

Table 3. Summary of Regression Analysis

Acculturative Stress	
Variable entered ($R^2 = .48$)	Beta
Culture shock	.68***
Language barrier	.41**
Fear	.45*

Note: N = 100; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

Table 1 above depicts the summary of the demographical information of the 100 respondents in this study. Information such as gender, age, marital status, country of origin, and other important information was taken for profile analysis. With reference to Table 1, all the figures and percentages were provided to facilitate interpretation. The sample used in this study comprises 100 full-time international students presently studying at Malaysian public universities. The majority of the respondents (73%) fall in the age group of 20 to 25, followed by 25-30 years old (16%). More than half of the respondents are male (57%). 83% of the respondents were single. The majority of the respondents, 36%, were from China, followed by India (26%), Pakistan (12%), and Japan (10%). 80% are studying Bachelor's degree. The respondents were mainly non-English native speakers (86%).

The Cronbach's Alpha value was used to test the reliability of the items measuring each variable. Table 2 shows the results of the reliability analysis and descriptive statistics for the variables. The results obtained indicated that Cronbach's Alpha value for all variables was above 0.70 and above. Fear only had a Cronbach alpha of 0.67. The Cronbach's Alpha for culture shock was the highest at 0.82. From Table 2, culture shock had the highest mean of 3.61 with a standard deviation of 0.79. Fear had the lowest mean (2.85) with a standard deviation of 0.88.

Table 3 summarizes the regression analysis. Regression analysis was performed to examine the relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The variables were tested significantly with ($p < 0.01$) and $F = 86.26$. This showed that the model for this research was good enough as the F value is more than 30 and indicates that the regression model is significant. The regression tests had presented a good inference with an R^2 of 0.48. The independent variables can project approximately 48% of the variance of acculturative stress. Variations of international students' acculturative stress can be explained by culture shock, language barriers, and fear. Then, the Durbin-Watson value is 2.06, which is satisfactory and confined to the acceptable range, 1.5 to 2.5, and this value indicates no autocorrelation of error terms. Table 3 revealed that culture shock, language barriers, and fear are significant predictors of acculturative stress. Overall, the quantitative findings are aligned with the qualitative findings of the study.

From the result above, it is critical to identify the factors influencing acculturative stress among international students in Malaysia. Other than common acculturative stressors, there could be various other factors influencing international students' levels of acculturative stress. Regrettably, international students' adjustment is frequently overlooked, which is a major concern because these students experience higher stress levels than other Malaysian students. Although this

restriction prevents enormous judgments from being drawn, some understanding of international students' acculturation encounters at a non-metropolitan university is made available in connection to the concentrations of acculturation, social and cultural acclimatization, and college contentment flagged up.

CONCLUSION

This paper provides new insights regarding international students' life experiences in acculturative stress literature. Future studies should look at students' levels of psychological adjustment and socio-cultural modification, which might also help Malaysian higher education meet the international students' needs

Malaysian universities need to address these challenges and develop initiatives, services, and programs that support international students to minimize acculturative stress. Given that culture shock, language barrier, and fear are the three significant predictors of acculturative stress among international students, Malaysian higher education institutions should build stronger academic and social programs (for example, peer supports, peer mentoring, and social gatherings) to promote social connections between international students and domestic students. Expanding peer support and mentoring would provide more support to international students. Malaysian higher education institutions need to commit significant resources to address language difficulties. They could take this problem forward by offering additional language classes or language assistance. In addition, Malaysian higher education institutions and academic staff need to be more sensitive to the language barriers and difficulties experienced by international students. For example, language support units can play a more effective role in assisting international students with language difficulties. To conclude, Malaysian higher education institutions should have a continuing interest in the educational development and the well-being of international students.

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