



INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ADAPTATION FACTORS IN MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES

IR Ismail*, YS Yushriman*, CH Che Noh*, AL Ahmad**, R Rashid*

* Pusat Pendidikan Asas dan Lanjutan, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu, Malaysia

** Pusat Perhubungan Antarabangsa, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Malaysia

*Corresponding Email: [1ismarosila@umt.edu.my](mailto:ismarosila@umt.edu.my), [2p4662@pps.umt.edu.my](mailto:p4662@pps.umt.edu.my), [3niza@umt.edu.my](mailto:niza@umt.edu.my),
[4alba@ukm.edu.my](mailto:alba@ukm.edu.my), [5roswati@umt.edu.my](mailto:roswati@umt.edu.my)

Abstract. The research focuses on the internationalization of Malaysia's Higher Education by ensuring that the increasing number of international students will be accommodated fairly. The issues addressed will revolve around the Psychological Factor with the Intercultural Adaptation Model by Kim Young Yun as the foundation. The model was used as the framework to focus on the psychological issue the international students experienced. Twelve international students were selected as respondents from four public universities in Malaysia: UPM, UKM, UM and USM as the main research area. This qualitative research used a semi-structured interview as the main instrument of data collection, online interview using WeBex and Google Meet were used. Respondents were selected using quota sampling with varying characteristics. Results were analysed by using the colour-coding technique assisted by ATLAS.ti. Although it is psychologically challenging, some of it is actually helping as a part of their life circle's support system, namely the presence of supportive classmates and support group.

Keywords: International Student, Adaptation, Public Universities

1. Introduction

Several public universities in the city's centre seemed to be making more efforts to advertise their services and provide seats for "international students," whether they are undergraduate or graduate students, although the pandemic now has live among us. In conjunction with that, the government has encouraged this trend of more international students coming to Malaysia in order to complement the Higher Education Ministry's Internationalization Agenda, which was released in 2007 [12] and is still being revised yearly to accommodate the stay of international students in Malaysia. By targeting to be one of the world's Higher Education Hub [9][10], all aspects of the international students such as environment personal and especially psychological aspects [34] must be taken into accounts to ensure that the trends of choosing Malaysia continues constantly. Figure 1 shows that during the starting of pandemic era in 2020, Malaysia still receives 12, 092 new applications from many parts of the world

leading by the East Asia (3236), MENA countries (2796), South Asia (2700), Southeast Asia (1367), Africa (1457), Central Asia (191) and from other countries around 345 applications. The next year, which is the peak of the virus spreading around the world with many more variants of CoVid-19 found, Malaysia still receives 15,524 new application and the number has seen as promising because of the 28% increase compared to the previous year. The number also shows that more efforts have to be put in order to be a good host to the international students and at the same time allows them to face the adaptation process naturally during their study in Malaysia.

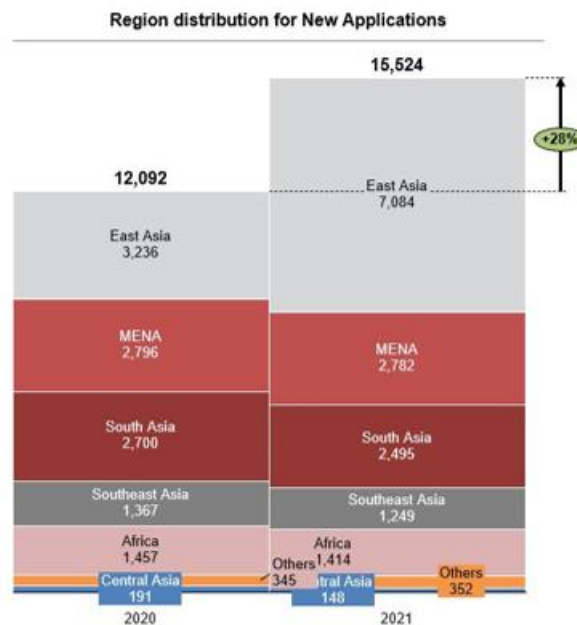


Figure 1. International student new application in year 2020 until 2021 (EMGS, 2022)

The literature studies were to assess the existing issues in terms of Psychological Adaptation. Some scholars mentioned that Acculturative Stress is one of the most concerned issues during when a new receiving the arrival of new batch of international students [1]. The acculturative stress also comes with having to deal with culture shock especially for the younger students taking certificates or the undergraduates students [23][24]. Culture shock can happen when they have less connected with their host country and have less contact with their friends [28]. Although the existence of social media and technologies has proven to reduce the effect of culture shock to the international students [3], it also contributes to the expectations either from the students towards the host universities because they have access to the reviews either positive or negatives. Receiving international students also means that students visas, immigrations and the embassy has to get ready to guide them through the process, rules and regulations during their stays in Malaysia. To prevent unwanted crime such money mule, drugs and rape which usually associated with the international student or persons who disguised as the international students a syndicate technique [33][37], the distribution of students pass with clear instructions of applications should be given. Hassle procedures can also contribute to lesser applications of international students and even tourist since the stress of the journey can affect their mental health [21].

Upon the problems mentioned above, this research focus on the international students' psychological adaptation process where it is a concern for not only the international student,

but all the younger generations now. This is due to the increase in psychological issues where they were all forced to keep up with the technologies use during Movement Control Order (MCO) and update to ensure their educational survival. By using the semi-structured interview, this study uses the online platform as the data collection method to address the psychological issues and update the issues parallel to the new world.

2. Method

The method used in this research is qualitative, with a semi-structured interview approach [19] conducted online, because it is thought to be capable of exploring facts in an era with MCO (Movement Control Order) through data systematically collected from interviews conducted using new norms platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, and WeBex which guidelines and questions constructed were based on the book *Doing Qualitative Research Online* [31]. As the Recording of the interviews were saved in mp4 format, and then converted to audio mp3 format. Utilising the use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) technology, the audio were then converted into text using the website *HappyScribe.com*. However, the transcripts were also double-checked by the researched to correct some minor mistakes. The Intercultural Adaptation Theory [15] was utilised as the foundation for developing the interview questions, and the twelve questions in the list has been assessed by the expert and approved to be used as the instrument of data collection. Twelve international students were chosen using the snowball technique and quota sampling based on criteria such as having lived in Malaysia as a postgraduate student for more than a year and being an ongoing postgraduate student from UPM, UKM, UM, and USM. The locations are the Research Universities which all located in main cities of Malaysia. The RUs were also chosen because of its high concentration of international student's population compared to other 18 public universities that were located in the small cities. After the interviews were transcribed, a colour-coding technique and thematics analysis [6][8] were combined with the help of ATLAS.ti as the fact-finding tool. This software will help produce the themes chosen by the theme categorisation and coding in the ATLAS.ti.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the analysis below, it can be seen that among the postgraduate's international students, the mentioned mental health issues above do not affect them but instead, the challenges in Psychological Adaptation have risen out the solution in handling the issues.

The support group is considered a social support network where individuals must build and sustain social support networks that increase resources for achieving demands [7] such as accepting differences in cultural ideas and worldviews, as well as to handle the stressors associated with considerable changes in everyday life [38].

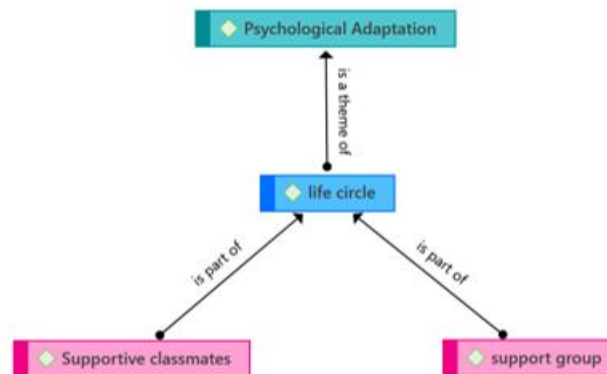


Figure 2. The Factors Affecting Psychological Adaptation

Figure 2 shows the findings derived from the interviews done which rules out the life circle as the main them in helping the Psychological Adaptation of the international students in Malaysia public university. It turns out, having a supportive classmate especially for the postgraduates with coursework mode and receiving support from the existing support group either from university or their own country of origins are important to help them have a healthy mental state during their stay in Malaysia. The having support group and supportive classmate were considered the latest strategies of adaptation for the postgraduate international students because they tend to find physical connection [27] rather than the millennial generations who usually more comfortable connects using the virtual platforms [1][2].

We hear a lot about acculturation, stress, and despair we were among the psychological issues that affects the younger generations much more frequent than the previous generations [19]. These are the types of mental health concerns that will have a long-term impact on a student's life, particularly in terms of psychology. Although the geographical and cultural aspects of the students from Indonesia is almost the same as Malaysia [29], we can see that they still need the help of support group to guide through the similarity and difference of this two region. This type of assimilation process can also lead to culture shock due to the confusion the students are having during their stay [28]. S2 noted that she is extremely reliant on her Indonesian support group.

"This support group was first found in my university's library, and then after a few meetings we created a WhatsApp group for communication for the next meeting to be easy. The group name is Sumber Kebahagiaan (Source of Happiness), and its members are from many different backgrounds, Master, and PhD., but all of them were from Indonesia." (S2)

The support group does not only come from the Indonesians, but also for the Bangladeshi. S4 from Tanzania also had his own support group he made and met during his first arrival in Malaysia. This community is the community that will help to get to the embassy and any other needs during their study in Malaysia.

"We have a community especially for Tanzanian in Malaysia. It is not big, but it is sizable. Good enough. When we first arrive, this community will approach us as in a WhatsApp group. So, whenever there is new information or new Tanzanians arrive, we will know." (S4)

Not all students have support groups from their own country. But they can find their own support by building a healthy circle to ensure that they are surrounded with good people [1].

For example, when international students are in need, they need to have someone in their inner circle as a lifesaver [14]. Since their families are far away from them, these students need to have a good support system in order to stay healthy both psychologically and physically [40]. This statement can be supported by an incident where S1 was in difficulties to open her local bank account.

“I have no bad experiences with my classmates. They are very friendly, and they help when we first arrive here. At that time, we could not open our bank account because of Covid-19, the banks were all closed. So, we could not buy anything online. But one of me and my husband’s friends offered to help us buy our things and offered to let us use his address during our quarantine.” (S1)

S3 from Bangladesh said that his country does not provide an official support group, but he tried to gather his friends from his country as a support group that will help him and them to adapt here. S3 dialogue was as below:

“Usually, we are our own support group. But I have a circle of friends which is a bit small because everyone has finished their studies. Right now, all the members around my age are doing masters and some of them have not finished their bachelor’s degree, so they are my juniors. This circle consists of seven people. (S3)

S2 also mentioned that she is happy that her classmates are very cooperative during their work group. The interpersonal communication they are building contributes to personality development [32] which are able to cooperate in teamwork. This also contributes to her mental health to not be burdened thinking about the free rider during the submission of assignment. S2 said that,

“Most of my group mates are very dedicated to their given tasks. There are none that gone missing during the middle of assignments and none of them have been a burden to either one of us.” (S2)

S1 also gives the same answer to the researcher questions “How do you adapt with locals during your study?” , that she did not have any problems during her online class before she came to Malaysia,

“Assignments were always done harmoniously with my classmate although it is an online class. We made time for each other and never crossed the assignments dateline.” (S5)

S5 thinks that her circle is very supportive. Again, although it is Covid-19 era, her circle never forgets each other in self-development.

“Since it is still in online mode in my university, instead of hanging out physically, my friends from Malaysia, no matter they are Malay, Indian, or Chinese, we do activities such as hanging out in the online space (GMeet, WeBex, WhatsApp, etc.) and if there are assignments that requires brainstorming, quizzes, we always wait for any one of us to initiate it like saying things such as ‘Guys, let us study!’ . (S5)

Many respondents believe that the manner Malaysians approached them made them feel welcome during their visit. The native behaviours made them feel like they were not strangers, and the locals normally approach them first. When it didn't work and no movements were made by the natives, they had to approach first. This shows that the natives contribute as a

part of the positive and important factors in their adaptation process [35]. S3, for example, believed that his attitudes about locals and establishing acquaintances had shifted more than his degree time.

“My first and second year of degree, I did not have any friends from my classmates or any Malay friends, but later when we made a group for an assignment, we started to share our daily life, gossiping, and hanging out together. (S3)

Now that he is pursuing his master's degree, he felt compelled to engage with the same approaches for the locals outside the institution. S3 stated in his interview,

“So, these are the same things I found to be used outside of the university. I feel like I need to reach them first instead of waiting for them to do it. So, every time I see potential new friends, local or university students from different countries, I try to reach them first because during my bachelor's, I always confine myself. I had a thinking that “Don't go near them”, “Don't talk to them” (S3)

Homesickness, which has always been one of the main reasons why adaptation processes are difficult, has only an impact on these international students, particularly the older ones [36]. Most of the first-year students does not experience the homesickness because they are still in their honeymoon phase and Malaysia being a country with Edu tourism and food heaven places [25], many activities can be done to distract them from being homesick and stress. Moreover, most of the postgraduate students have already brought their families to Malaysia, and staying longer in Malaysia has made them feel accustomed to it. Homesickness normally occurs once or twice a year, but with the advent of technology, nothing is impossible to resolve. Answering the questions ‘Have you ever felt extreme homesick?’ S4 mentioned that,

“No. Not at all homesickness ever happened. I managed to settle very well, very easily. I think the Malaysians, especially the one I met during my degree, and plus my international community made my adaptation process go well.” (S4)

Two responses from Indonesia and one from Bangladesh dealt with homesickness by utilising technology, which has previously served as a connector, removing the barrier of time zone and distance. S5 also stated that she felt homesick every day from the beginning of her studies till she had completed one year of physical education in Malaysia. But she would contact her family and make time for her closest pals.

“I call straight away every time homesickness consumes me. This year, I had to celebrate Eid in Malaysia, and my Ramadhan was not easy without my family. Quality time with family was already replaced with quality time with friends.” (S5)

However, homesickness can occasionally be alleviated by distracting oneself from the notion of it. For example, S2 noted that she was studying and felt that she wanted to go home to continue her life as a student, so she went for a walk.

“After a year of furthering my study here, I always miss home. But none of the feelings made me feel like I wanted to die, feeling sick or in misery or something. A phone call can always settle it and life must go on. And if the feelings continue, I will go for a walk to release the feelings or do some exciting activities. (S2)

4. Conclusion

International students are experiencing existing adaptation issues on a regular basis, and competitiveness from local peers, the most significant element in the Personal factor, has given them a boost akin to culture shock to accelerate their development in adaptation. The existence of psychological factors shows that mental health conditions can be impacted by a person's choice of life circle, which is crucial to ensuring the long-term survival of international students while they are studying in Malaysia. Information, preventions, and precautions are easily accessible in today's digital society, which highlights the importance of supportive life circle as one of the success indicators in addition to social media optimization.

Acknowledgement

This research was carried out under the Universiti Malaysia Terengganu Fundamental Research Grant Scheme (FRGS) VOT 59656, granted by the Higher Education Ministry of Malaysia.

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