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Adjustment problems among international students in Malaysian private higher education institutions

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Abstract: The Malaysian government aims to internationalize tertiary education in the country. In order to attract more international students, it is important to understand and develop measures to overcome the various kinds of adjustment problems they face. A quantitative survey using the 'International Student Problem Inventory' was conducted on randomly selected international students from five major private higher education institutions in Malaysia. Data analysis revealed that the adjustment problems related to academic, religious, personal, and social adjustment problems were rated high, with financial, and language adjustment problems showing the least impact. Based on the findings, some recommendations are provided to help international students get adjusted to the Malaysian environment and achieve academic success.

Keywords: Higher education; internationalization; adjustment problems; Malaysia

1. Introduction

The Malaysian international education sector has grown tremendously during the past decade and Malaysia is fast becoming a centre of educational excellence in the region. The flow of international students in Malaysia has increased steadily since 1996, mostly in higher education where currently higher education opportunities in Malaysia are provided by 20 public universities, 24 polytechnics, 37 public community colleges, 33 private universities, 4 foreign university branch campuses and about 500 private colleges. (Refer Appendix A). There are also various higher educational institutions from the UK, US, Australia, Canada, France, Germany and New Zealand which offer twinning and franchised degree programs through partnerships with Malaysian colleges and universities (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009).

At present, international students represent less than 5% of all tertiary enrolments in Malaysia. Although the percentage is small, Malaysia's target is 80,000 international students by 2010 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). Malaysia is emerging as an important destination for students from various countries, the reason being the high academic standards in the Malaysian education system. Malaysia is progressively becoming a hub for education as international students are constantly flocking the corridors of Malaysian universities and colleges are still attracting many International students from different parts of world. However, to become a major player and enjoy the ultimate benefits of having international students, Malaysia essentially needs to acquire global competencies, either in the curriculum, administrative easiness, or pricing and analyze adjustment problems faced by international students in Malaysia in order to make its location a strategic choice for higher education. So, the issue of adjustment and transition of international students must be studied and addressed as it is the best way which involved all who have interest over this issue to ensure the success of the transition to the host country and the learning institutions.

2. Adjustment issues of international students

The idea that international students experience transition and adjustment difficulties when engaging in international education is not new. For example, as early as 1963, researchers have conducted studies on attitudes and social relations of foreign students (Selltitz, Christ, Havel, & Cook, 1963). International students face a myriad of change and may have difficulty adjusting in a wide variety of areas. Zhai (2004) reported that international

students in his study listed adjusting to academic stress, cultural differences, and language challenges within the U.S. higher education system as their three most significant challenges. Andrade (2006) has stated several significant insights into international students' challenges and successes at English-speaking universities. To name a few:

- (1) International students have greater and different adjustment challenges than domestic students; however, they may be more academically engaged. In general, they have difficulties with English language and culture and experience more anxiety, stress, homesickness, and loneliness, and have less social support than domestic students.
- (2) International students may need different types and levels of support depending on such factors as years in school, level of study (graduate or undergraduate), immigration status, age, gender, country of origin and educational background.
- (3) The process of adjustment appears to be gradual.
- (4) Faculty often misinterpret the behaviors of international students and need greater understanding of their academic, social, emotional, and psychological challenges. Faculty can make pedagogical adjustments to support the learning needs of international students.
- (5) International students are academically successful, often due to compensating strategies related to academic skills, motivation, and effort. International students are generally satisfied with their experiences in English-speaking universities, but possibly more so with academic aspects than social aspects.

As most of the Literature is based upon foreign students (non-native English speakers) coming to English speaking countries (specifically, the United States, and to a lesser degree, the United Kingdom and Australia) or to countries which conduct courses in English medium to study, not surprisingly, English language proficiency has been rated as one of the most common difficulties. Although most international students have taken an English proficiency test, usually the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), IELTS or other requirement tests in English before being admitted to colleges or university, many still have difficulty with the language. The Literature has been very consistent in stating that this area is a huge concern for international students. Lin and Yi (1997) stated that international students may have difficulty adjusting to the various accents of the instructors and understanding class lectures, often require extra time to read their text books and are often unable to articulate their knowledge due to their limited vocabulary. In another study, international students listed English Language as their third biggest concern, noting that they would like more help with pronunciation (Fitzgerald, 1998).

An obvious and huge area of concern for international students is academics. Andrade (2006) stated that, 'academic adjustment problems for international students tend to focus on language issues'. Zhai (2004) reported that meeting academic demands was the most overwhelming difficulty for international students during their adjustment stage. He went on to say that while language proficiency was the most frequently investigated concern, students in his group felt it was not as stressful as the stress of academics. International students also have to adapt socially as well, and many find this difficult. Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, and Van Horn (2002) found that international students experienced less social support than domestic students, most likely because their family and friends were not close and visiting them was difficult and infrequent. Rajapaksa and Dundes (2003) discovered that international students felt more lonely and homesick than domestic students. International students who feel socially connected and who are satisfied with their social networks are less likely to experience acculturative distress (Yeh, 2003). Finances are another major stressor for international students. Lin and Yi (1997) stated that international students must assume a full-time student status while enrolled in school and thus working becomes very difficult. In another study, international students listed finances as a major cause of concern, along with English Language and living/dining (Fitzgerald, 1998). Thomas and Althen (1989) completed a literature review and stated that, based on the articles and studies they had examined, the international students can suffer from a variety of adjustment issues, which can include: depression/helplessness, hostility toward the host country, anxiety, over-identification with the home country, withdrawal, homesickness, and loneliness.

Lin and Yi (1997) supported this literature when they stated that, 'Many Asian international students experience the following: pressure from academic demands, language barriers, financial concerns, performance anxiety, depression, loneliness, homesickness, relationship problems, non assertiveness, individualism and bicultural conflicts, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination and paranoia. They often worry about social and political situations in their home country. In addition, they are concerned about the well-being of their families. Also, they worry about securing employment upon graduation. Finally, they may have anxieties about readjustment if they are planning to return to their country.

Tseng and Newton (2002) summarized the key adjustment problems faced by international students into four categories: (a) general living adjustment, (b) socio-cultural adjustment, (c) personal psychological adjustment, and (d) academic adjustment. General living adjustment include such areas as adjusting to weather/climate, transportation systems, paying bills, health care systems, food, and housing arrangements. Although these may seem

like small details, they can consume much of the students' time and energy. Socio-cultural adjustment refers to experiencing culture shock, discrimination, and getting used to new values, norms, holidays, and customs. Depression, loneliness, feelings of isolation, homesickness and frustration make up the issue of personal psychological adjustment. Academic adjustment is probably the most well known of the four. As mentioned previously, students have difficulty with learning a new educational system, lack of language proficiency, and acquiring new learning strategies.

3. Methodology

Survey research method was used to elicit demographic information about respondents, as well as their perspectives on various adjustment issues. The survey questionnaire used in this study is a modified version of the 'International Student Problem Inventory' originally devised by John Porter as the Michigan International Student Problem Inventory and later modified by Jenkins and Galloway (2009). The questionnaire consisted of two parts. Part one was structured to elicit the demographic information about the respondents and part two comprised 132 open and close-ended questions focused on respondents' views about financial, language, social, academic, religious, and personal aspects.

The population for the study comprised international students from five major private university colleges in Malaysia. Although there were many private universities and colleges at the time of this study only five major Malaysian private higher education institutions were chosen for the study, as these universities were considered as reputable and well-established and aimed to increase their number of international students. The questionnaires were randomly distributed to more than 500 international students in the five private university colleges and 250 questionnaires were returned with full information, representing a 50% return rate.

4. Results

The analysis of the first part of data on demographic variables indicates that out of the 250 respondents, 56% were males and 44% females. In terms of enrolment, 86.8% respondents were pursuing undergraduate level studies and another 13.2% of respondents were pursuing postgraduate studies. The percentage of single students (82.4%) is comparatively higher than married students (17.6%). The respondents for this study originated from various parts of the world with the majority (33.2%) from the Middle East countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran (students from the Middle East find Malaysia as a perfect hub of education as the issue of religion is less likely to bother them for Malaysia is an Islamic nation). This is followed by students from Southeast Asia mainly from Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Philippines that comprised 26.4%. The balance is from China and the subcontinent of India, and some other region.

The second part of the questionnaires is about various types of adjustment problems faced by international students. Table 1 shows that there are six categories of adjustment problems. The rank ordering by mean values indicate that academic adjustments (mean = 88.92) is the leading adjustment problem followed by religion adjustments (mean = 69.72), personal adjustments (mean = 68.50), social adjustments (mean = 66.28), financial adjustments (mean = 38.19), and finally language adjustments (mean = 21.34). The academic adjustments are mainly about the administration of courses and facilities in the college. It is also about the respondents' view on overall quality of education provided in Malaysia. Most of students have problems in adapting to the new learning environment and expectations.

Adjustment problems related to religion and accompanying practices seem to be a concern for the international students in private institutions. Personal adjustments were based on personal view, health problems and feelings. The respondents have certain problems in dealing with issues regarding their health and view on relationship among local students. Similar issues were supported by the study of Thomas and Althen (1989) that states how international students can suffer from a variety of personal adjustment issues such as depression, helplessness, hostility toward the host country, anxiety, over-identification with the home country, withdrawal, home sickness, and loneliness.

As for social adjustments, the respondents have expressed their views on questions regarding their relationship with local students and communication problems faced in mixing around in Malaysian society. Financial constraint is one of the minor problems and is ranked number five. International students in general do not seem to be suffering from lack of funds. They are able to find part time jobs, the cost of living in Malaysia is manageable; students usually come prepared with sufficient funding from their home countries, and some do receive financial aid from host institutions. The language adjustment is not a major problem among the international students for almost all

courses are conducted in the English language and the international students are screened for English language proficiency.

Table 1 Ranking of adjustment problem levels by area for all students (N=250)

Adjustment problem	Mean	SD
Academic adjustments	88.9160	18.04092
Social adjustment	66.2760	12.67796
Language adjustments	21.3360	5.49544
Financial adjustments	38.1920	8.54724
Religious adjustments	69.7240	14.18013
Personal adjustments	68.5000	14.23053

5. Discussion and recommendation

International students from across countries face a range of unique difficulties in their studies in Malaysian universities: language, social, finance, religion, personal and academic. Far too often international students cite language as the basis for all the difficulties students display. But the challenges international students face are not merely caused by language issues. In addition to language, deep-seated cultural influences play a significant role as well. It is important that there is awareness of the significant cultural factors which impinge upon the learning experiences of international students, and that effective strategies are developed to facilitate their learning adjustment. The importance of such awareness cannot be over emphasized. Becoming aware involves both the learners and the teachers. It involves awareness of one's own embedded cultural values or orientations about learning, and, at the same time, developing awareness of other people's embedded cultural values and orientations. Both the learners and teachers can become consciously become aware of the cross cultural differences; this shared awareness will help to prepare students and staff to promote effective learning in cross-cultural situations. It prepares the students to feel confident and comfortable in the realization that their experience is normal. Whilst accepting that it is all right to be different, students can work at strategies to adjust effectively to the new study demands at universities. The belief inherent in this work is that knowledge and understanding of the deeper cultural issues involved in higher education overall will help prepare students to adjust to their first year of study. For this International Students Affairs offices at colleges must set up a special division for cultural aspects where students are able to share and contribute their views.

Clearly, awareness by staff is also very important. In many instances, stereotyping is very common, and a student can be judged on the basis of a group characteristic. Whilst this may be understandable practice when information is limited at institutional level regarding an individual student's attributes, it is not useful when attempting to identify the specific needs and characteristic of an individual student. If a staff member wants to assist an individual student in his or her learning, then much more sophisticated understanding needs to be involved. For example, the notion of a positive model is important, where acknowledging and valuing students' previous educational success is significant in building trust and positive relationships in teaching and learning situations. Both academic and non-academic university staff need to equip themselves with sufficient knowledge of various backgrounds of international students. This could be done through special training, visiting programs to different countries and encouragement to conduct personal development in the area of international students. Advanced awareness of staff in this area enables them to actively assist students to adjust. Malaysian private universities can capitalize on the rich cultural resources that international students bring with them. In the current climate of internationalization, vast opportunities can be explored, such as curriculum development using the resources of

international students for deeper understanding across cultures in social, educational and business contexts both onshore and offshore.

6. Conclusion

In recent years the number of international students is increasing and the post-secondary institutions are rapidly expanding to include more and more of these international students. With the increasing interest of foreign students towards Malaysia, the Malaysian education sector – both private and public -- must pay attention to the adjustment and transition issues of international students. It is crucial that Malaysian institutions of higher education pay attention to the financial, social, academic, personal, religious, and language aspects that impact or affect them. The Malaysian higher education sector also needs to streamline its strategy for internationalization with greater improvement on the course, quality of student services such as accommodation and recreation facilities, and the others relating to the teaching resources, in particular well-qualified lecturers and capable administrators.

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