

# **International students in Asian universities: exploring barriers to sociocultural adjustment**

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This case study is an exploration of barriers to the sociocultural adjustment of international students in a Malaysian English medium university. Malaysia saw a 26.5% increase in international student population between 2008 and 2009 and this is attributed mainly to the branding of its education sector – Malaysia Education (Mohammed Nasser, 2006). The brand draws deep on sociocultural resonances to promote education including a unique multicultural experience. But to what extent are the international students adjusting to the local sociocultural environment and buying into the ‘experience’? The sample for the study comprised international students enrolled in an English proficiency program. Data was collected using a modified version of Ward and Kennedy’s (1999) Sociocultural Adaptation Scale and a focus group interview provided for further exploration of the barriers identified by the scale, i.e. discrimination, difficulty in communicating with locals and other foreigners and dealing with departments and agencies. The general finding of studies undertaken in the West is that the major adjustment barriers concern living adjustment (accommodation, food and climate), language, racism and discrimination. Though there is less distance between the home and the host sociocultural environment, interestingly, this study confirms some of these barriers. However, scarcity of literature on international student adjustment in Asian universities has limited regional comparisons. In conclusion, the paper reviews the implications of localized interventions (support groups and culture sensitive programs) as well as regional efforts that can augment intercultural education (Edu-Tourism).

**Keywords:** adjustment, sociocultural, multicultural, intercultural education

## **Background**

With competition increasing in the global higher education market, providers are banking on identifiable brands to help promote themselves and create significant market presence. A recent contender in this market is Malaysia. Prior to the 1990s, higher education in Malaysia was mainly state controlled and beset by quota systems, budgetary constraints and limited places for study. The excess demand for higher education was met by foreign institutions located mainly in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia. However, increasing demand brought on by a growing number in the population age cohort eligible for higher education and the onslaught of the economic crisis in the mid 1980s coerced the Malaysian government into rethinking its higher education policy. So in order to meet this burgeoning demand and to stem the outflow of foreign exchange, the government embarked on liberalizing the higher education sector. The policy change was subsequently sealed with the introduction of the Private Higher Education Institutions Act (1996) which provided the legal framework for establishing and maintaining private higher

education institutions. Currently there are more than 500 private higher education institutions in Malaysia which are categorized as universities, university-colleges, colleges and branches of foreign universities. These institutions offer a wide array of programs at certificate, diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate level. Most are located in the Klang Valley, i.e. Kuala Lumpur, its suburbs and adjoining cities and towns in the state of Selangor, where infrastructure is more readily available. Malaysia's international student population comprises mostly students from the Middle-East (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Oman), East Asia (China, Korea and Japan), South-East Asia (Indonesia, Vietnam and Cambodia), Central Asia (Russia, Mongolia and Kazakhstan) and Africa (South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Mali and Ghana).

Malaysia's meteoric transformation into an international student destination is thus attributable to the availability of programs, particularly foreign degree programs, the use of English as the medium of instruction and to some extent to the stringent application process among some Western higher education providers following 9/11 (Sirat, 2008). Buoyed by the positive turn of events, the government has set a target of 200,00 international students by 2020, the current figure stands at 70,000. More importantly, the onus is on private higher education institutions to meet this target.

Private institutions are expected to play a pivotal role in bringing in foreign students as public universities have a foreign student cap of 5% of its total student population. (Lim, 2010, p.4)

To this end, the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education is working on enhancing Malaysia's pull factors such as quality assurance, a strong educational infrastructure, a healthy ecosystem and branding. As far as brand was concerned, Malaysia only had to turn to its unique sociocultural diversity to provide the perfect backdrop. The multicultural society, a by-product of British colonization of the country, is typified by the distinct cultural inputs of three major ethnic groups – Malays, Chinese and Indians. Religious freedom enshrined in the constitution allows Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism to coexist with the main religion Islam. Consequently, mosques, churches and temples can be found all over the country. While the country's official language is Bahasa Malaysia, English is considered the second language and the medium of instruction in Malaysian higher education. So, it is easy to see why the brand 'Malaysia Education' promises the international student a unique, multicultural experience.

### **International Student Adjustment : Review of Barriers**

Adjusting to another country, especially one that is socially and culturally different, can be an overwhelming and sometimes even a daunting experience for students. In fact, adjusting to a new culture is the first problem that is typically faced by the international students (Barletta and Kobayashi, 2007).

Where cultural adjustment is concerned, Furnham and Bochner's (1982) "cultural distance" theory still remains pertinent. Based on a series of pilot studies, they found that the greater the distance between the home culture and the host culture, the more cultural difficulty the international students would experience. In Ward and Kennedy's (1993) study of Asian students in Singapore and New Zealand it was discovered that greater sociocultural difficulties were experienced by Chinese students who relocated to New Zealand compared to those who relocated

to Singapore. Similarly, they report greater relationship between psychological and sociocultural adaptation in Malaysian students in Singapore compared to Singaporean and Malaysian students in New Zealand. However, not all the studies support this theory. Studies by Tsang (2001) and Jou (1996) found that students from China studying in Japan and Singapore experienced greater stress despite Singapore and Japan sharing the same Confucian-heritage culture with China.

A great deal of research effort has been devoted to international student adjustment and various problems, challenges and barriers have been forwarded. Common problems faced by international students include: racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, dietary restrictions, financial stress, loss of social support, stressful relationships with locals, misunderstandings and loneliness (Lin and Yi, 1997; Reynolds and Constantine, 2007; Khoo et al., 2002)

A dominant factor in sociocultural adjustment is language especially if the language is perceived as useful in identifying with the culture (Kagan and Cohen, 1990). Empirical research has documented that language ability is positively related to sociocultural adaptation and those fluent in the host language experience fewer social difficulties (Sano, 1990; Ward, 1994). Language competency is also associated with increased interaction with host nationals and this asserts Ward, et al. (1999) may exert additional positive influences on sociocultural adaptation by expanding available networks. In reference to English speaking countries, Mori (2002) says the lack of English skills would most likely affect not only the student's academic performance but also his social life. But Chen and Chen (2009) warn that the impact of language even affects students who speak English in their home country because these students must adjust to a new accent and new idioms.

Another factor that impacts on the international students' adjustment is the student's social network (Rajapaksa and Dundes, 2002). Social network includes interactions and friendships the international student forms with locals as well as with other international students. Based on a study undertaken in the United States, Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) found that international students who have little contact with Americans report more feelings of isolation and alienation than those students who foster American student contact. Gillette (2005), on the other hand, claims that interactions with those from the same culture can also aid in the adjustment process by providing a much needed social network.

Discrimination and racism has also been recognized as a crucial challenge for international students. They tend to occur mostly in public places such as shops, buses, trains, and dance halls (Khoo et al., 2002). According to Arthur (2004), this might be the first time for the international students to confront these issues due to the shift from being the majority race to a minority race.

## **The Study**

While research on international student adjustment has been prolific in the West, such initiatives are limited not only in Malaysia but in the Asian region in general. Apart from the region's recent presence in the global higher education scene, the tendency to assume adjustment, especially sociocultural adjustment, seems to preclude the need for research. The Malaysian international student population is largely made up of students from the Middle East, East Asia, Central Asia, South-East Asia and Africa – regions that share certain sociocultural similarities with Malaysia

and this has given rise to the belief that students will automatically adjust.

As Malaysia is a cosmopolitan country, foreign students from China and Indonesia would feel at home here. Communication-wise, these students have no problems as the local speak Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin. The same applies to Indonesian students. They face no difficulties here as the Bahasa Indonesia they speak is similar to Bahasa Malaysia. (Naseer, 2008, p. E4)

...people from Middle-East find it easy to adjust to Malaysia as our cultures are similar (Khoo, 2007, p.E5).

The aim of this exploratory study therefore is to seek baseline information on barriers to international students' sociocultural adjustment in Malaysia. Based on the results of the study, measures to enhance students' sociocultural adjustment are also discussed. The study was undertaken at a local private university-college offering both local and foreign degree programs. A mixed-method data collection approach was adopted to enable identification (questionnaire) as well as understanding (focus group interview) of barriers. Questionnaire distribution involved 221 students enrolled in an English proficiency course. The students responded to i) demographic questionnaire, ii) an open-ended question requiring student to briefly describe their stay in Malaysia and, iii) a modified version of Ward and Kennedy's (1999) Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS). The demographic questionnaire was incorporated to elicit information on the student's region of origin, age, gender, marital status, living arrangement and perceived language fluency (English and Bahasa Malaysia). The SCAS contained 26 items that measure the individual's adaptation in terms of the amount of difficulty experienced in a variety of situations. Each item is rated on a 5 point likert scale ranging from 1 (no difficulty) to 5 (extreme difficulty). 186 usable questionnaires were returned for a response rate of about 84%. Reliability analysis of the SAS yielded a coefficient of 0.77 illustrating an acceptable level of internal consistency.

For participation in the focus group interview (FGI), 5 students were selected at random from the different regions. A total of 21 students from the Middle-East (N = 5), South Asia (N = 5), South-East Asia (N = 4), Central Asia (N = 4) and Africa (N = 3) participated in the interview. Data were collected from the focus group using key issues identified by the survey as prompts: climate, transportation/traffic, service, language and cost of living.

### **Questionnaire Results**

This section provides information on the students' demographic profile. The majority of the students who participated in the survey are from East Asia (33.9%) followed by the Middle-East (25.3%), Central Asia (16.1%), South-East Asia (12.4%), Africa (10.8%) and others (1.6%). Of the 186 students, 60% are male and 40% are female. Almost half the students (49%) are in the below 20 age group, 38% are in the 20-30 age group and 13% are in the above 30 age group. The majority (74%) of the students are single and only a small percentage (26%) are married. 41% of the students live in the hostel and another 32% live with friends. 17% of the students live on their own and 10% live with family members/relatives. The majority (52%) rated their English language fluency as average, 24% rated it as poor, 15% rated it as fluent and 9% think it is very poor. More than half (58%) rated their fluency in Bahasa Malaysia as poor, 19% rated it as very poor, 16% rated it as average and only 7% feel it is fluent.

This section presents the analysis of the students responses to the SCAS. There are only 3 areas where students do not experience any adjustment difficulty.

Table 1: No Adjustment Difficulty

Item No.	Description	Percentage of Students
5	Understanding different religious practices	43%
18	Dressing the way you want	49%
20	Finding places of worship	61

There are 5 areas where students experience slight adjustment difficulty.

Table 2: Slight Difficulty Adjusting

Item No.	Description	Percentage of Students
8	Understanding local customs and traditions	49%
10	Understanding the way of life	44%
23	Understanding the local political system	53%
25	Talking about yourself with others	43%
27	Spending free time	51%

In most of the areas (N=11), students report moderate adjustment difficulty.

Table 3: Moderate Difficulty Adjusting

Item No.	Description	Percentage of Students
1	Making friends	56%
3	Following rules and regulations	52%
9	Getting people to understand what you are saying	43%
13	Understanding jokes and humor	42%
15	Going to social functions	47%
16	Dealing with people staring at you	45%
17	Talking to people of different races	59%
22	Finding your way around	60%

26	Working with students from different ethnic backgrounds	49%
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Students report great difficulty in 6 areas.

Table 4: Great Difficulty Adjusting

Item No.	Description	Percentage of Students
4	Dealing with people in authority	52%
7	Dealing with departments and agencies	51%
12	Dealing with someone who is rude and unpleasant	49%
14	Finding suitable accommodation	58%
19	Dealing with poor or bad service	47%
21	Communicating with other foreigners	52%

There are only 2 areas where the students experience extreme adjustment difficulty.

Table 5: Extreme Difficulty Adjusting

Item No.	Description	Percentage of Students
6	Using transport system	62%
24	Dealing with the climate	64%

T-tests undertaken to compare adjustment difficulty to gender, age and marital status showed no significant differences. Correlation between adjustment difficulty and language fluency was moderate and significant for English ( $r = .475$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ) and Bahasa Malaysia ( $r = .481$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ).

The final section of the questionnaire required students to describe briefly their stay in Malaysia. Analysis of the description reveal 3 categories: positive, negative and mixed descriptions. Positive descriptions accounted for 23% of the responses. Recurring positive expressions include: happy, very happy, so happy, good, comfortable, love, like, kind, friendly and welcoming. These expressions are made in reference to several factors: the people, presence of a large international student population in the country, friends and the opportunity to use/improve English.

“I love Malaysia, Malaysian people they are very kind and friendly”

“I like Malaysia because of welcoming people and also because of many

international students who are studying here”

“I am happy here as I can make many friends”

“I think stay in Malaysia is good. I think my English is better than in China”

Negative descriptions make up 29% of the responses. Recurring negative expressions include: bad, very bad, boring, very boring, slow, rude, lazy, expensive and very expensive. The expressions refer to service providers (taxi drivers, restaurant workers and counter staff), the climate, transportation/traffic and the cost of living.

“It's very boring here. You can't do much, just stay at hostel and study because everything is money”

“Traffic is very bad and some taxi drivers they cheat me because I'm not Malaysian”

“When I apply airline card, the assistant didn't tell me how. It's so rude”

“It's so hot. That's all”

Mixed descriptions are more pervasive (39%). They offer insights into both sides of the adjustment coin, i.e. aspects that students are happy with and those that they are not happy or comfortable with.

“It's difficult to communicate with local people and foreigners here in English. However, most people are friendly”

“I think Malaysia is good. But all is expensive”

“I think Malaysia is a good place. But I don't like the weather, it's very hot”

“I like Malaysia but the only problem is that our hostel has no sports facility”

## **Interview Results**

Almost all the students complained about the hot and humid climate which made them uncomfortable and restricted their activities. Apart from the heat, students were also perturbed by the heavy showers which tend to cause traffic jams and occasional flash floods in the city. There was a lot of discontentment with service providers particularly taxi drivers, restaurant workers and counter staff (immigration, police, airline and at the university college). The problems encountered by the students with regards to service providers include being cheated/overcharged, staff who refuse to speak in English and staff who are rude and slow in providing service.

Taxis are the student's preferred mode of transportation as they find it convenient and also because they are not very familiar with other modes of transportation like buses and the Light Rail Transport or LRT. Almost all the students feel that the cost of living in Malaysia is high compared to their own country. This seems to have affected the students in three areas: food, accommodation and leisure activities (travel, entertainment, etc). Apart from difficulty finding food they enjoy, they also have to find cheap food as food expenses tend to eat into their budget. Most of the students opted to live in the hostel because of the high cost of rentals and difficulty in locating accommodation close to the university-college. The issue of local owners taking advantage of foreign students by raising rentals was also highlighted during the discussion. While happy that living in the hostel enabled them to make more friends, especially with other foreign students, the students lamented the lack of activities in the hostel particularly sports and recreational activities. Activities was high on the student's wish list, especially trips or outings

that would allow them to see more of Malaysia. Currently, most of the students' activities are limited to shopping, eating and watching movies with friends who are mainly from their own country.

## **Discussion**

Apart from economic benefits, there are also social benefits that accrue from internationalizing education – international students are an invaluable resource for increasing global understanding, tolerance and in widening the perspectives of the local population. To take full advantage of the benefits, issues pertaining to international student adjustment need to be addressed. This study has revealed that international students in Malaysia experience a high level of sociocultural adjustment difficulty. While understanding local values, culture and religions do not pose a lot of problems, it is in meeting the demands of daily life that students experience most of their difficulties. It is also to be noted here that most of the issues or difficulties pertaining to sociocultural adjustment are interrelated. So based on the findings of this study, a two-pronged approach, involving localized interventions and regional efforts, is suggested.

Localized interventions: Service, language and discrimination issues are ideally addressed through support groups and culture sensitive programs. Support groups should be both campus-based (involving students and staff of the college) and community-based (involving outsiders, e.g. foreign working in the country). This will give the students a broader perspective of adjustment issues thereby assisting them to function better within the campus and in the community. Additionally, the government, private institutions of higher education and non-governmental groups can work towards increasing culture sensitivity through advertisements, campaigns, workshops, etc. It is timely and crucial to spread the message on international students - who they are and why they are in Malaysia. More importantly, the awareness efforts should target service providers in the public and private sectors. Since private institutions of higher education have been the given the responsibility for propagating international student numbers, these institutions should ensure adequate facilities and activities for students. It is important that the relevant departments in the institution (Student Affairs, Counseling, etc.) play a more proactive role by ensuring not only the international students academic needs are met but their social, recreational, accommodation and dietary needs are taken care of as well especially at the transition stage. Providing the students with an information package and guided tours upon arrival are some of the measures that should be included in the orientation package for the students. This will help the students to acclimatize to the weather, cost of living, food, etc. Social, cultural, sports and recreational activities are crucial in ensuring that students buy into Malaysia Education's multicultural experience which seems to have eluded these international students.

Regional efforts : At the regional level, one way of augmenting intercultural education is through Education Tourism or Edu-Tourism. Edu-Tourism allows international students short stints in the country via programs that incorporate educational activities (e.g. English language classes) and visits/tours/homestays. This will enable students to get a feel of the country and ease their later adjustment should they decide to further their studies in the country. Finally, promoting the concept requires not only commitment but more importantly, collaborations between governments in the region as issues of visa and entry requirements come into play. Global education is here and there is a need for countries in the region to activate collaboration where possible in favor of competition in order for the region to thrive as an educational hub.

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