

# Is all well? Academically-successful International Students in Malaysia

## Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper examines the adjustment experiences of academically-successful international students in living and learning in a private Malaysian higher education institution (HEI).

**Design/methodology/approach:** 53 international students participated in a mixed method study where they completed a survey (close and open-ended questions). Twelve were also interviewed.

**Findings:** The findings diverge from other studies in that issues with respondents' English language proficiency were minimal, but for some of the students, social and cultural adjustment was problematic. However, these students were proactive in improving their situations. These findings indicate foci for university improvement in study and living experiences for all students.

**Research limitations/implications:** The study is limited to one group of academically-successful students at a private university in Malaysia.

**Practical implications:** There are benefits to HEIs and international students in enabling students to reflect upon and share their successful strategies. These not only enable students to recognise and value their achievements but also contribute to the development of more inclusive practices that will enhance future students' transition and overall learning experience.

**Originality/value:** The study contributes to the literature with its focus on academically-successful students at a private university in Malaysia, both of which are areas of limited research coverage.

**Keywords:** higher education, academically-successful, international students, adjustment issues, private university, Malaysia

**Paper type:** Research Paper

## Introduction

With increasing numbers of international students in higher education (HE) globally, there is growing recognition of the benefits of engaging with international students to enhance their overall learning experience. For instance, Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood (2018) pointed out that international students are an asset, and that institutions should foster their engagement with university staff and home students. This would support mutual understanding and develop new ways for local staff, students and international students to work and learn together, enhancing the experience for all.

The term 'international students' in this study refers to students who move to another country for tertiary or higher education (Shapiro *et al.*, 2014); the term 'successful' refers to students with A and B study grades. This paper, in exploring the perspectives of successful international students at a private university in Malaysia, provides valuable insights into the obstacles they face, despite their academic success. Importantly, it explores their response to institutional strategies that influence their adjustment. This is vital in the competitive global environment where institutions aim to enhance the educational experience for all their students, including the international.

The paper outlines the Malaysian HE context, then reviews literature, largely focusing on the challenges and problems encountered by international students in Malaysian HEIs. The study

methods are then described, and the results and findings discussed. Finally, recommendations are made for future action and research avenues.

## **Literature Review**

### **International Students and Malaysian HE**

Since the 1990s with economic and geopolitical trends, diversity in Malaysian university classrooms has increased, with greater international student numbers and their increased influence (Morshidi, 2008). By 2017, 170,068 international students were studying at Malaysian universities (Ministry of Higher Education, 2018).

Malaysia is becoming a HE destination of choice for international students (UNESCO, 2014). Reasons include cultural comfort, particularly for Muslim students, cost of education programme, quality education, English as the instructional medium, and quality of life. Despite the increasing student numbers, Morshidi (2008) warns that Malaysia has *to move beyond numbers* and focus on institutional-level factors, for *meaningful outcomes of international student mobility and exchanges* (p. 90), to sustain and excel in a competitive environment. This study's focus on the experiences of academically-successful international undergraduate students is highly relevant to enhancing international students' learning and living experiences, and potentially for all students. Given the increasing diversity of students, understanding the experiences of academically-successful international students is highly pertinent to Malaysian HE.

Coverage in the literature of international students' strategies to support their academic success, especially in Malaysian HE (Singh *et al.*, 2014; Mohd-Yusoff, 2012) is limited. However, interest has grown, globally and in Malaysia, with the increasing international student numbers and recognition of the importance of understanding adjustment and transition experiences. Existing global studies, typically, position international students as lacking, and often work from a deficit model (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2018). This study questions the assumptions underpinning the deficit model by exploring the experiences of successful students. The study draws on topics covered within the dominant deficit literature merely to provide a point of comparison.

### **Academic Adjustment Challenges**

The biggest hurdle for international students in Malaysian HEIs institutions concerns language and the English teaching medium. Al-Khasawneh (2010), for example, reported Arab postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university struggling with writing in English for academic purposes. Although the findings suggested challenges related to their home countries' language learning experiences, Al-Khasawneh attributed this to the lack of language support, particularly in "discipline-specific English classes" (2010, p. 20). Al-Zubaidi and Recharads' (2010) cross-institutional study on Arab postgraduate students in Malaysia confirmed academic adjustment obstacles, including the lack of preparatory language programmes for "academic research and writing" (Al-Zubaidi and Recharads, 2011, p. 127). A study by Chong and Amlil Hazlin (2013), exploring group work found that students from Saudi Arabia and Yemen studying in Malaysia faced difficulty in interacting with domestic students because of the "language barrier".

The deficit however is not always located with the students; several researchers identified academics' English language pronunciation as problematic (Alavi and Mansor, 2011; Chong and Amlil Hazlin, 2013). The international students in Alavi and Mansor's (2011) study found

that academics' strong Malaysian-accented English problematic. Furthermore, some academics while teaching in English resorted to their native language, Bahasa Melayu. To address this, Chong and Amlil Hazlin (2013) suggested a language programme for academics.

Administration of courses and learning facilities were also problematic for some, for example, curriculum and teaching methods (Alavi and Mansor, 2011) and low quality facilities (Zuria *et al.*, 2010). Academic work culture differences (Al-Zubaidi and Rechards, 2010) were also identified as barriers to academic adjustment. Differences in "work culture" also hindered international students' willingness to work academically with local students (Chong and Amlil Hazlin, 2013). To mitigate these issues, Mohd-Yusoff and Othman (2011) suggested an academically-focused orientation programme for understanding the "academic demands" of Malaysian university classrooms and strategies for international students to cope with psychological and academic stress (p. 11).

### **Social and Cultural Adjustment Challenges**

Malaysian (Chong and Amlil Hazlin, 2013), Taiwanese (Pare and Tsay, 2015) and Australian (Erlenawati *et al.*, 2008) studies showed that language-related issues affect international students' social adjustment. For example, where English is the teaching medium but where domestic students converse in their home language, it is difficult for students to establish social networks with domestic students and can result in feelings of alienation from the learning environment (Pare and Tsay, 2015). For international students, "*the absence of the [home and] preferred cultural and/or linguistic environment*" was a reason for feeling isolated (Erlenawati *et al.*, 2008, p. 148). Many international students found social adjustment difficult since they had to develop relationships or contacts in a new cultural context (Erlenawati, 2008). Often, misunderstandings were attributed to international students' lack of cultural information of the host country and locals' lack of awareness of international students' cultural practices.

Ambigapathy (2008) reported that cultural practice differences appeared to affect international students' relationship with local students. He advocated that universities should "increase and enhance inter-cultural interactions" through initiatives to develop "inter-cultural interactions...inter-cultural friendships and international understanding" (p. 56). In research by Mohd-Yusoff and Othman (2011), cultural practices influenced international students' social relationships with Malaysian students and thus their psychological adjustment. They argued that international students' establishing social support networks was vital, providing "powerful coping resources" to benefit their general wellbeing in transition to living and learning at Malaysian universities (Mohd-Yusoff and Othman, 2011, p.11). An embedded approach was proposed through English language courses building cultural awareness of the local contexts (Al-Zubaidi and Rechards, 2010).

For the Arab international students in Al-Zubaidi and Rechards' (2010) study, 68% (224) found multicultural and 80% (262) multi-religious contexts a positive feature of Malaysia. Unsurprisingly, social adjustment was supported by similarities between their own cultural practices and those of the majority Muslim population in Malaysia (Al-Zubaidi and Rechards, 2010). Singh *et al.* (2014) confirmed the influence of Malaysian multiculturalism but explored the range of general living factors that international students needed to manage in their transition and adjustment process.

### **General Living Adjustment Challenges**

General living conditions may pose challenges for international students. Zuria *et al.* (2010) reported that Malaysia's year-round hot climate was unbearable for some. Other research suggested adjusting to different food, living environment and climate, financial and health

concerns as challenging (Tseng and Newton, 2002; Singh *et al.*, (2014). Some of them were within a university's responsibility and control. Examples include concerns regarding "dirty hostels, unpredictable bus schedules, inefficient university health centre doctors, and lack of English signage and documents" (Zuria *et al.*, 2010). Others include lack of recreational facilities and lack of opportunities for entertainment, exercising and hobbies (Alavi and Mansor, 2011). This affects international students' adjustment as they are often confined to living on or close to the campus. According to Sumer *et al.* (2008), universities with sufficient support services are better at supporting international student adjustment. This indicates the need to constantly upgrade available support and facilities at Malaysian universities to facilitate international students' adjustment.

### **Research focus**

Three key foci emerge from this literature review. Firstly, a gap remains in research about understanding international students' experiences of adjusting to the Malaysian HE system and of living as students in Malaysia (Mohd-Yusoff, 2012; Singh *et al.*, 2014). Secondly, existing research focus is on postgraduate students' adjustment in public universities (Al-Khasawneh, 2010; Al-Zubaidi and Rechards, 2010; Ambigapathy, 2008); and only one study to understand international students experiences at Malaysian private universities (Chong and Amlil Hazlin, 2013). This gap is considerable, as the majority of international students in Malaysia are in private HE institutions (Statistik Pendidikan Tinggi 2017, MOHE). Thirdly, hearing the 'voices' of international students from the breadth of countries is needed; to date, many of the Malaysian studies have been on Middle Eastern students. Fourthly, the objective of this study is to offer evidence that challenges the stereotypical images portrayed in the deficit model by inviting academically-successful international students to identify strategies they employed and suggest improvements based on their experience.

The following are the questions for the current study that explores the living and learning adjustment of academically-successful international students at a private HE institution in Malaysia:

1. How long was it for the academically-successful students to feel they have 'adjusted' to student life and learning at the university?
2. In adjusting to student life and learning, what adjustment issues and challenges did the academically-successful international students face?
3. From their perspective, what would support international student adjustment to student life and learning?

## **Methods**

### **Data collection**

The study adopts a mixed method approach. Data emanates from a questionnaire including demographic and academic details (gender, age, place of origin, qualification, work experience, first and/or second language, average grade) and closed questions on life and learning adjustments, and strategies used to adjust to life and learning at the university, and open-ended questions regarding service/ support improvement. The statements for closed questions were derived from international student deficit research, and used Likert scale rating, from 'most problematic' to 'not problematic at all', and 'never use' to 'use all the time'. To investigate these issues further, a semi-structured interview was used. The research tools, information sheets, and consent forms received university ethical committee clearance.

## **Sample**

The study site was a private HE institution in Malaysia, where three of the authors work, which supported access to the students. When the study was conducted, international students were approximately 13% ( $n= 821$ ) of the total student number at the university.

After receiving research ethics approval, managers of the Business School, School of Science and Technology and School of Arts were asked to provide contact details of international students who had an average grade of either 'A' or 'B'. 131 potential research participants were identified and they were sent an invitation to participate in the study. Of the sample, 40% ( $n=53$ ) agreed to participate in the survey questionnaire. For further insights into their adjustment, participants were invited to share their experiences in an interview. Only twelve (23%) of the students completing the survey agreed to be interviewed. In the study, the qualitative approach undertaken was "aimed at finding out "what things 'exist' [rather] than determine(ing) how many such things there are" (Walker, 1985: 3).

There were twelve Asian, five African and one European country represented in the study. The number of students from each country varied, from 1 to 16, with Indonesia (16) the most common Asian country and Mauritius (10) the most common African country. Eight students (2 (Zambia), 1 (Indonesia), 2 (India), 1 (Zimbabwe), 1 (the Philippines), and 1 (Sweden)) identified English as the first language spoken at home while 25 (47.2%) indicated English as their second language. Forty-four degree and 9 diploma-level students participated in the study. Students participated in the study were at different year levels: 17 (32%) students in year 1, and 36 (68%) in year 2. Interviewed students were from Mauritius (5), Indonesia (2), Myanmar (1), Maldives (1), China (1), Sri Lanka (1) and Brunei (1).

## **Data analysis**

Quantitative questionnaire responses were analysed using SPSS to generate a descriptive analysis of the data. Qualitative data was analysed thematically drawing upon both deductive codes emerging from the literature and inductive codes based on the repeated review of the interview transcripts and open statements from the survey. These codes were then sorted into categories and clustered into themes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005) which are discussed below. Combining quantitative and qualitative data from survey and interviews generated a data set that provided a nuanced account of the complexity of the experience of these academically-successful international students.

## **Results and discussion**

The relationship between student life and learning is complex and somewhat artificial to separate. However, for this discussion, the issues for life adjustment are presented followed by factors influencing adjustment for learning.

From the questionnaire, the reliability of 10 items of adjustment to student life items was found to be highly reliable which can be shown by the Cronbach alpha of 0.828. Likewise, the 10 items of adjustment to learning at the university produced a high reliability value of 0.822. However, the reliability of strategies to adjust to learning/student life was found to be low yet acceptable at a rate of 0.774 for 14 items.

Despite their academic success, students' life and learning adjustment varied. Of the 53 students, 40 (75%) reported they had adjusted completely or well. Most adjusted to both student life and learning, suggesting that successful learning adjustment supports student life adjustment, and vice versa. There were exceptions: one student indicated poor learning adjustment, even after progressing to second year with an average grade of 77 (A grade = a

mark of 70 and above). Some second-year students indicated that they had only begun to adjust. It thus seems that academic success equates to a smooth adjustment is not supported by the data.

Responses on what students found problematic about adjusting to student life or learning provided further evidence. As interviews revealed, the challenge was often a unique combination of issues that individual students faced as indicated in Table 1 below:

Names <sup>1</sup>	Issues with adjustment to student life	Issues with adjustment to learning
Ben	None	None
Lena	Adapting to new social life “No one to push me to do things”	None
Zack	Managing household chores Adapting to new cultures	None
Rita	Adjusting to new cultures/ local food Making friends with local students	Forming groups with local students Understanding local examples
Anjay	Managing expenses	Managing time Understanding local dialect/local examples
Joanna	Adjusting to new cultures/ new life style/ weather/ local food/ new eating habits Making new friends	Adjusting to new styles of teaching/ different English accents/ different ways people worked in groups Forming groups with others
Rose	Adjusting to new cultures	Forming groups with local students Understanding local dialects/local examples Communicating in English Managing learning of difficult topics
Suria	Learning to live on her own Gaining acceptance from others	None
Arif	Making new friends	Understanding different accents of English language
Roshan	Managing freedom	Identifying learning strategies that worked Understanding local dialects
Liza	Homesickness/ Learning to live on her own	No adjustment issues
Mei	None	Understanding lectures due to low English language proficiency Communicating in English Language

Table 1: Interview data on issues with adjustment to student life and learning

### Issue and challenges in student life adjustment

Interview data identified general living, social and cultural adjustments as the main challenges to adjustment to student life at the university. Some issues were individual and outside the university’s control, for example, adjusting to the weather and local food, and managing freedom, chores and expenses. Several issues raised were what universities could influence, like adapting to new cultures and establishing new friendship with others, particularly local students. Furthermore, data from survey (Table 2) indicated that social adjustment challenges that these students experienced were not straightforward.

<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms

For example, 18 (34%) students reported that communication with peers, others' acceptance, and 19 (35.8%) reported that making friends and living with people of different races were not problematic. However, these issues do seem closely related to the largest concern regarding learning: working in groups (see below and Table 1).

<b>Social and Cultural Issue</b>	<b>Not problematic</b>	<b>Least problematic</b>	<b>Most or Somewhat Problematic</b>
Understanding the culture	11(20.8%)	24(45.3%)	18(34%)
Managing own expenses	12(22.6%)	22(41.5%)	19(35.8%)
Managing own time	18(34%)	12(22.6%)	23(43.4%)
Communication with peers	18(34%)	17(32%)	18(34%)
Others acceptance of you	18(34%)	17(32%)	18(34%)
Making friends	19(35.8%)	23(43.4%)	11(20.8%)
Living with people of different races	19(35.8%)	19(35.8)	15(28.3%)
Getting use to the food	21(39.6%)	15(28.3%)	17(32%)
Getting use to the weather	22(41.5%)	13(24.5%)	18(34%)
Living far away from family	27(50.9%)	16(30.2%)	10(18.9%)

Table 2: Students reporting social and cultural factors as not problematic- most problematic (n=53)

The importance of friendship in life and learning adjustment is consistent with other research (Erlenawati *et al.*, 2008; Ng *et al.*, 2018). Open statements and interviews about peer friendship and communication revealed positive and negative experiences, which suggest how universities can enhance the overall student experience. Activities to help international students' initial stress can be beneficial to students, as one respondent explained: if this adjustment aspect is supported, they could then focus on learning.

For some, arrival at the university was a positive and welcoming experience, Lena, for example, made friends with her Malaysian classmates who were *“really kind to me, and actually they take special care to ask me if I’m okay, if I understand what’s going on.”* In contrast, Rita felt making friends with local students challenging because they *“already have their group of friends.”* Anjay attributed it to many local students *“don’t hang around after class”* as they *“live with their parents still”* as one hurdle to forging friendship with local students. Whilst initially open to making friends and working with local students, if international students found this difficult, then they would, like Rita and Suria, establish friends with other international students or students from their home country. Anjay’s account offers another insight into student friendships: He made friends with international students who lived with him or near his accommodation.

The interaction between student life and learning is complex. For some students, academic programme was important in making new friends who support student life adjustment. Arif, made friends with other international students studying ‘Malaysian Studies’ module in the first semester and he was pleased that *“I’m still friends with them”*. The module was important in developing students’ cultural understanding, identified as most or somewhat problematic for 18 (34%) students. For instance, Rose understood more about Malaysia, its culture and people after taking this module, because she could *“understand the cultural background, like why the country became this country.”*

### Issues and challenges in adjusting to university learning

Students identified influences on their learning adjustment (Table 3) but two factors stand out: Working in groups, and understanding spoken English, which influenced group work, and closely linked to friendship and communication issues.

Student learning issue	Not problematic	Least problematic	Most/ somewhat problematic
Working in groups	12(22.6%)	17(32%)	24(45.3%)
Understanding teachers' expectation	12(22.6%)	25(47.2%)	16(30.2%)
Adapting to different teaching styles	16(30.2%)	23(43.4%)	14(26.5%)
Getting use to the assessment method	18(34%)	26(49%)	9(17%)
Adapting to different learning methods	21(39.6%)	18(34%)	14(26.5%)
Understanding lectures	25(47.2%)	15(28.3%)	13(24.6%)
Understanding spoken English	33(62.3%)	9(17%)	11(20.7%)
Using available learning facilities	36(67.9%)	14(26.4%)	3(5.7%)
Gaining acceptance from others	19(35.8%)	15(28.3%)	19(35.9%)
Paying fees	29(54.7%)	17(32%)	7(13.2%)

Table 3: Students reporting not problematic, least problematic, most / somewhat problematic factors influence learning (n=53)

Group work was identified as the most problematic for 24 students (45.3%) but not for twelve. Interviews indicated these difficulties were linked to acceptance or communication and relationship issues, and practical challenges.

Reflecting on group work, Rita shared, “when I go to class, I’ll have to be the one making the first step to have a conversation ... [I] still don’t have anyone [local] to really work with or motivate me in some ways.” This resulted in her feeling alone and excluded “in the beginning”. However, since managing her expectations and being proactive in approach, she felt she had adjusted.

These strategies did not however address logistics, which Rose felt were more problematic for group work with local students, the majority of whom lived off campus and therefore wanted to hold meetings “outside campus”. Group project work with other international students was easier because most lived on or close to campus. Arif rationalised that it was natural that local students formed groups with other local students and international students with the international students since “everyone knows each other from semester one so when they go into a classroom, they always have something in common because they are foreign students.”

Communication with local students was another factor influencing group work. Some international students found difficulties with local students’ “problems with English”. Understanding different varieties of spoken English was also a struggle for Joanna. Local students and lecturers communicating in local dialects, as shared by Anjay, Rose and Roshan added to the problems. However, Mei’, because of her low confidence in her English proficiency, often opted to work with other Mandarin-speaking peers, regardless of nationality.



### **Strategies for successful adjustment**

Students adopted proactive strategies to adjust to the challenges they encountered; these included seeking help from trusted individuals and investing time and effort to learn about the culture and improve their command of the English language.

Thirty respondents (54.7%) preferred talking to their friends, while 36 (68%) preferred talking to their family, whereas only 19 respondents (35.9%) reported talking to their lecturers. Forty-three students (81.2%) reported reminding themselves why they were at university.

Thirty-eight students (71.7%) adapted their learning style to the teaching style of lecturers most or all of the time. Other popular strategies included: “I learn about the people and the culture here” (64.1%); “I persevere” (62.2%); “I try to improve my command of the English Language” (60.3%); and “I make myself busy with work and my studies” (56.6%). Strategies never used included “meeting the counsellor” (75.5%) and “taking medication” (86.8%).

During interviews, students explained how they took initiatives to befriend others, initiate conversations or join clubs (Lena, Joanna, and Suria) to enable them to make new friends. Mobile devices and applications proved useful to manage living expenses (Anjay) and manage time (Lena). Roshan learned Mandarin and also tried to speak English in the local accent to bond with local students.

These students were distinct in their willingness, to share their learning problems with peers or their respective lecturers in learning situations, rather than adopt the deficit position. Most asked their lecturers to provide relevant examples and ask group members to speak in English so they could understand. In contrast, Anjay researched local examples mentioned during lessons to aid his understanding of the local context.

Students were also strategic during group work. For example, Rita, Rose and Suria often worked with students from their home country, who shared similar learning goals. Mei’s lack of proficiency in English Language made her form groups with other Mandarin-speaking students; thus, she could focus on the task and not on communication issues. When working with local students who had lower English language proficiency, Anjay and Rita took charge of editing the group’s work.

Zack, Anjay, Arif, Roshan, and Liza all emphasised effective time management and ensuring a good balance between study and leisure. For Zack, leisure time *‘is compulsory’*. *On Saturdays, I don’t work because there are races back in Mauritius, so I wait to watch it live here..* Anjay would allocate weekdays for studying and weekends for social activities, explaining, *“It’s not all about studies”*.

Most of these students had clear career plans that helped them remain focused, motivated and determined. Rita’s sense of purpose, helped her adjust to her international status and related sense of exclusion: *“I know that I have come here for a purpose, so no matter how excluded I feel, or included, because I’m not from this country. It’s normal no matter how hard I try, that people won’t view me as the same as they are in the peer group, so it’s okay”*.

### **Support for student life and learning adjustment**

Students’ suggestions for strategies and activities that they felt contributed positively to their adjustment were analysed to identify support for student life and learning adjustment, but also revealed insights into their previous learning experiences that shape their expectations.

Three themes emerged from the analysis of open questions, and were expanded on during interviews, namely: 1. ‘orientation activities and clubs that are a source of information and support integration’, 2. ‘events that foster cultural awareness and interaction between local and international students’ and 3. more explicit ‘approaches to create an inclusive learning environment and support academic engagement’.

The university’s initial formal transition support for international students’ student life adjustment was provided through: A 6-hour study skills workshop and a survival skills booklet. Briefings at the time of arrival were often on “*a few basic ground rules, norms on the culture and language*” or details about “*all the available facilities, or maybe highlight the routes to classes*”. Rose observed that when students first arrive “*they are barely eighteen*” and lacked life experience thus stressed for more arrival support. Anjay agreed and indicated that it was his first time living away from home, and having to manage laundry, cleaning, and expenses on his own, finding consistent with Lam *et al.* (2017).

Rose emphasised on the importance of information-exchange opportunities, suggesting orientation activities where international students from different countries meet one another. Other suggestions were for international students to “*meet once they arrive and pair together*”, or “*some seniors could take part in helping new students*”, and for a more active buddy system. Lena championed “*more active mentorship programmes*” as they effectively supported her adjustment because she felt there was someone to talk to. Listening to others’ troubles had helped her “*realise that it’s okay to have some trouble.*”

Social activities and clubs were identified as key outside-the-classroom opportunities to “*aid international students to make friends with local students sooner*”. Students recognised that this would assist them in their academic adjustment and prevent the situation where “*the locals group together while foreign students are grouped together*”. There was a strong sense that “*there needs to be more work done to integrate locals and international students*”. Another respondent suggested a club for international and local students “*to communicate and share things with each other*”.

The value of cultural exchange activities to ease international student life adjustment was also recognised. These helped to “*break the ice among different cultures*” and encourage students to “*... feel comfortable rather than abiding by cultural grouping or racial profiling*”. Another respondent emphasised the need for events early on, so international students could appreciate “*the culture of the locals from an earlier point*”, for example, “*the culture of going out for late night suppers [which is] “a great opportunity to make friends*”. Four students discussed a separate international student orientation and support activities. Although they offered this alternative based on their experience, creating informal spaces for international students to meet with other international students and form same-culture networks should not be underestimated, in fact Erlenawati *et al.* (2008) argued it is crucial.

The importance of bridging cultural or linguistic differences was evident in suggestions for ‘approaches to create an inclusive learning environment and support academic engagement’. These suggestions closely connect to relevance, flexibility and collaboration which are three of the principles of inclusive curriculum design (Morgan and Houghton, 2011). For instance, students articulated the importance of more international examples, explaining that, “*some lecturers use examples that happened in Malaysia before we came here which aren’t relatable to us*”. They advocated for more opportunities for international students to share their own “*local experiences*” or use “*examples of companies in our own countries*”. Students want

improved communication between academics and international students, particularly about their expectations, and using language or examples understandable by all. It seems academics may be missing out on the opportunity to supplement their teaching with ‘international’ examples and perspectives which, as elements of an internationalised curriculum, would benefit the classrooms (Crosling *et al.*, 2008).

To ensure that both local and international students benefit from the university’s multicultural learning environment, social and cultural integration should be an ongoing process, bridging learning inside and outside the classroom. To improve international students’ learning experiences, findings indicate the need for international students to work on group projects with local students. Respondents thought this would not happen automatically thus academics should provide guidance to multinational teams in group formation and encourage mutual understanding and tolerance (Crosling and Martin, 2004). Many believed that students should interact with others with different perspectives, culture, educational background, and life experiences. This study’s findings should raise academic awareness of the challenges, but more particularly the ideas and value international students place on accessing truly international study experience.

Fostering tolerance and valuing the contribution of all students is important for an inclusive learning environment, as emphasised by the students. They commented on academics recognising their previous learning experiences and not relying on assumptions because “*students are from different backgrounds, many students really do not have any foundation in some particular subjects*”. An international student explained the differences in coverage and pace of learning: “*I think in Asian culture, Math is taught faster so learning to adapt was a struggle and the fast pace of the class made it harder*”. Some students shared that some academics remain unaware of changing classroom demographics, which require alternative approaches to ensure an inclusive and equitable experience for international students.

Several comments related to factors influencing classroom communication were connected to teaching and group work. Firstly, the importance of accurate English used in teaching was stressed. It was a concern when tutors moved between English and their native language during lectures, or “*made grammatical mistakes*”. Some international students also lamented local students’ poor command of English which they felt affected group work. To avoid or reduce group work, some suggested more individual assignment tasks rather than group work. However, some respondents recognised the learning gains of working together, and explained it was important to “*learn to work with people from... walks of life.*”

## **Conclusion**

The research findings in this small-scale study add the perspective of academically-successful international students at a private Malaysian university: That their adjustment to life and learning was complex. Being proactive, many were able to overcome their adjustment challenges but institutionally, more can be done to support their adjustment. The findings of the study offer ideas for how institutions can respond with responsibility for supporting international students. Additionally, there are suggestions for inclusive teaching and learning strategies that are likely to support all students engage with their studies.

## **Implications for practice**

The findings of the study offer ideas for how institutions can respond with responsibility for supporting international students. Additionally, there are suggestions for inclusive teaching and learning strategies that are likely to support all students engage with their studies. These are listed below:

- Establishing social platforms where international students can network with other students as early as when they first arrived, perhaps through community-based programme where connections can be sustained (Ng, Haslam, Haslam & Cruwys (2017). Doing so may help develop a sense of belonging among international students that is clearly very important.
- When planning induction activities and classroom activities especially in the initial weeks, it is important to try and identify and use what individual students bring to the context, and help them to recognise their own value and that of their peers.
- Adopting inclusive approaches that provide opportunities for students to learn and work together within the classroom, so that students can be supported in building networks within the learning environment. Focusing on solutions and gathering ideas during the interviews provided an example of a collaborative approach which could be integrated into other feedback activities.
- Increasing academics' awareness of their crucial roles in supporting group work, and international students' contexts and adjustment challenges. This may help academics realise the importance of bringing in international contexts into their teaching.
- Encouraging academically-successful students to share their experiences in overcoming challenges and becoming academically-successful, with other students (local and international).

### **Ideas for future research**

The scope of the study is limited to one private university in Malaysia and was conducted on a small sample size, thus findings from the study may not be generalised to other contexts. To have a deeper understanding of international students' adjustments in Malaysian universities, future studies on international student adjustments should involve a number of Malaysia HE institutions, with samples from both public and private universities.

To mitigate challenges and support international student adjustment, further investigation is required into the learning environment factors. It would benefit from discussion with academics regarding their awareness and views of the challenges, the suggestions presented and their experience with implementing successful strategies. The academics' perspective could reveal hidden structural obstacles and ideas for improvement.

The study generates further questions for investigation:

- Understanding how language issues created challenges to adjustment since some language issues identified in the study were unlike those reported in other research conducted in Malaysian HE institutions (Al Khasawneh, 2010; Singh, 2015).
- Auditing/mapping the student support services, including for specific student groups, such as international. This would identify gaps, reduce 'silo' activities and enhance overall communication about support available.
- Evaluating the effectiveness of transition and orientation programmes and support services by both local and international students to identify gaps and ideas for improvement.
- Exploring the local students' and the academics experiences with international students for enhancement of social and cultural relations in and out of the classroom.
- Embedding findings into continuous professional development to raise academics' awareness and appreciation of cultural and educational background differences, learning pace and prior educational experiences for all students to have a fair chance to succeed.

This paper on the adjustment experiences of academically-successful international students reveals the dangers of grouping students and assuming that their experiences will be similar. Although academically successful, these students encountered life and learning challenges during their transition. Despite or perhaps because of the challenges they experienced, these students were able to outline strategies for success and identify areas for improvement. The ideas for supporting adjustment, are of benefit to students regardless of backgrounds and academic achievement levels, their teachers, the institution and the HE system overall.

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