

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON ADJUSTMENTS TOWARDS INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' SATISFACTION IN MALAYSIAN UNIVERSITIES

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**Abstract:** *Internationalization of higher education is one of the important transformation process of developing countries towards globalization. The success of this country depends on the accomplishment and the progress of its educational system as it is one of the determining factor in the expansion of the nation economy at the national level. Generally, Malaysia is fast becoming one of the main education attractions among the international students from other countries around the world. International student enrolments make a vital economic contribution to universities in the whole region of the world. Satisfied students will help to attract more potential future customers (new students) to the institutions/universities through positive word of mouth (WOM) communication, increased students' loyalty and the good image of the higher education institution. However, to satisfy the customers is not easy, then to satisfy the customers with different cultural background will be even more difficult. Adjusting to a new culture can be so challenging and stressful experience for international students. Furthermore, it may put them at a greater risk than local students at the host countries. Racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, dietary restrictions, financial problems, and loneliness are the common and unique problems that they faced during their life while they were away from their home country. Number of studies have been carried out on campus adjustment among international students in western countries but, only few studies had been done in Asian countries like Malaysia. This study contributes to the ongoing interest of research regarding the adjustments and international students' satisfaction in Malaysian universities. Therefore, the conceptual framework is presented that provides the explanation of the relationship between adjustments and international students' satisfaction in Malaysian universities. Implication for future research, discussion and overall conclusion are also presented at the end of the paper.*

**Keywords:** *International students' Satisfaction, Adjustments, Malaysian Universities*

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## Introduction

Education plays a big part in the development and advancement of a country. The success of this country depends on the accomplishment and the progress of its educational system. According to Becket & Brookes (2008), the education sector has the capacity to stimulate national economic growth through international student enrolments. Arambewela, Hall & Zuhair, (2005) mentioned in their study that the international student market plays a very important role for higher educational institutions (HEIs) in order to generate revenue for the higher education sector. Generally, Malaysia is fast becoming one of the main education attractions among the 'mature student' from the other countries around the world (Azizah et al., 2014). 'Mature student' here is referring to international students whom are pursuing their studies in Malaysian universities. According to Paige (1990), international students are defined as individual who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship in order to participate in international educational exchange as students.

Malaysia, as a developing country in South East Asia, is equally affected with the challenges of globalization and internationalization of education. Realising the importance of international students to the national income, Malaysian government has been set up the Strategic Plan of Malaysian Higher Education in order to achieve the goals, vision and mission for Malaysia to become a hub of educational excellence of higher education by the year 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012). The National Higher Education Strategic Plan (PSPTN) 2007-2020, gave emphasis to comprehensive internationalization efforts capable of making Malaysia as a regional hub with 200,000 international students' enrolment by the year of 2020 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2007). Given this large number of international students, greater attention has been directed toward the adjustment of students from abroad to Malaysia (Ambigapathy, 2008; Morshidi, 2008; Yusliza, 2010; Yusliza & Shankar, 2010; Yusliza, 2011). Based on this strategic plan, Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) is planning to increase the number of international student enrolment by monitoring international students' perception of the quality of academic and services provided by Malaysian Higher Educational Institutions (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). 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 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). This has caused a surge of transformation in delivery system among most of higher education institutions in Malaysia.

Following to the Malaysia determination to attract more international students to come and study in Malaysian Universities, therefore, the study of international students must be conducted in order to determine their adjustments towards students' satisfaction in Malaysian universities. As the number of international students entering Malaysian universities increasing from year to year, the need to understand their sociocultural adaptation and adjustments to this Malaysian country become more important (Yusliza and Shankar, 2010). A conceptual framework in this study provides a fundamental on adjustments among international students towards students' satisfaction in Malaysian Universities. A study on sociocultural by Maria et al., (2015) have mentioned that many research and studies have been carried out on campus adjustment of international student in the western countries but, only few studies have been carried out in Asian countries like Malaysia. Furthermore, although the number of international students in campuses continues to increase, only limited number of recently published studies have examined this topic in Malaysia country (Yusliza, 2011). Recently, Malaysian universities and colleges are still attracting many international students from different part of

the world. Accordingly, to become a major player and enjoy the benefits of having international students, Malaysia essentially need to understand the adjustment problems faced by international students and try to provide them with the best services and right support.

Therefore, this paper aims to develop a conceptual framework of adjustments towards international students' satisfaction in Malaysian universities for future research. Moreover, this paper intended to contribute to the Malaysian literature pertaining to this issue and researcher hope that this conceptual paper will provide useful insight for universities in Malaysia in managing international students in this country.

## **Literature Review**

It has been documented that international student fees can contribute to national economy. Developing satisfied customers amongst international students should therefore be a primary goal of higher education (Petrussellis, D'Uggento & Romanazzi, 2006). Therefore, if Malaysia wants to gain a sustainable competitive advantage in this very competitive industry, it is crucial that the management of Malaysian universities must develop a thorough understanding of the university services that can bring the greatest impact on student satisfaction (Parasuraman, Berry & Zeithmal, 1988; Yeo, 2008a).

According to DeSheilds, Kara and Kaynak (2005), it is important for universities to develop strategies in order to differentiate their services from others. For the purpose of resource allocation, the universities must set up their strategies to ascertain the key determinants of student satisfaction as to help universities prioritise the services they provided them (Doughlas, et al., 2006). In the context of the competitive Malaysian higher education sector, further research must be done in order to identify what are the services that management of the Malaysian universities can provide to international students. Furthermore, what are the actions or indicator must be taken in order to help the international students for their satisfaction and adjustments? Suggestions and recommendations from the studies could help and provide better understanding as well as the best guidelines for the management in Malaysian universities. Matzler, Wurtele and Renzl (2006) mentioned that further research must go beyond merely by identifying the determinants of student satisfaction in term of students' behaviours such as positive word of mouth, their personal recommendations and re-enrolment or loyalty towards their educational institutions. All of this dimensions will help the management of the universities to determine their economic growth, profitability as well as their performance in providing services.

### ***a) Students' satisfaction***

The concept of student as customer is not new. However, this customer relationship is not as clear cut as some other service relationship, given that students are also "partners" in the learning process (Douglas et al., 2008). According to Guolla (1999), researchers who have studied student satisfaction will take the role of students as customers even though there are many debates about the role of students for example, they can be as customers, clients, producers and also as products. Satisfied students will help to attract more potential future customers (new students) to the institutions/universities through positive word of mouth (WOM) communication, increased students' loyalty and the good image of the higher education institution (Arambewela, 2003; Arambawela & Hall, 2006; Slethaug & Manjula,

2012). Slethaug & Manjula (2012) has mentioned in their study that with positive word of mouth, student will likely recommend highly to their family members and friends to pursue at higher education/universities that they are satisfied with. This positive recommendation will eventually improve students' retention and growth for the university as well as to lead for better branding reputation of the university (Arambewela, 2003). Atheeyaman (2000) confirmed that there is significantly strong relationship between satisfied students with positive word of mouth and student retention. Accordingly, it is a must for universities to deliver their service very well in order to satisfy their customers (students) with the services that provided to them. Therefore, students' satisfaction is a key strategic variable in maintaining the stiff competition in international higher education (Arambewela, 2003; Arambewela et al., 2006). Besides, it will be increasing the number of student enrolment, reduce student attrition and enhance students' experience.

According to Usman (2010), most of the well-established high learning institutions focus highly on strategic issues like providing excellent customer services. It is important because by doing so they would be able to make and build good relationships with clients which is actually very important by determining their future in the industry. Higher learning institutions are like other service based firms which is dependent on its customers' perceptions (among their students) and one of the most effective and powerful marketing strategy in this regard is through positive word of mouth (WOM). Students are likely to be satisfied in their educational institution when the service provided fits their expectations. Furthermore, the students will be very satisfied when the service is beyond their expectations when they received the services more than they expect. On the contrary, students are dissatisfied with the educational institution when the service is less than their expectation. In addition, when the service they received is less than their expectations and when the gap between perceived and expected service quality is high, they tend to communicate the negative aspects (Petruzzellis, Uggento & Romanazzi, 2006).

According to Tian and Wang (2010), they argued that satisfaction is the function of the congruency between the perceived performance and esteemed benefits resulting from consumer personal values and the configuration of customer values is affected by central cultural values. They also mentioned that cultural differences have a direct influence on the students' satisfaction regarding their perception on the services they received. Besides that, to satisfy the customers is not easy, then to satisfy the customers with different cultural background will be even more difficult. Numerous studies have been conducted on customer satisfaction in the marketing as well as management field. Unfortunately, limited study has been done in education field especially in higher education institutions/universities (Ilias et al., 2008). Other than that, there are many literatures available regarding customer satisfaction among international students but, majority of the researchers are conducted on customer satisfaction among international students in developed countries like United Kingdom, Australia, United States of America and New Zealand. There are little literatures on customer satisfaction among international students in developing countries (Oldfield and Baron, 2000; Joseph et. al., 2005; Hasan et. al., 2009). Furthermore, regardless of the quantity of the researchers done, only limited literature is available regarding education and quality within Malaysian universities (Wei & Ramalu, 2011).

The theory of confirmation/disconfirmation developed by Parasuraman et al., (1985) suggests that satisfaction as a dependent of the confirmation and anticipation. The same idea was

supported by Hon et al., (1999), which imply that emotional/mental outcome derives from the comparison between the actual and the expected service quality. Thus, the customer satisfaction can be summarized as an overall assessment of the organization's performance with regard to the outcome and the process of reaching satisfaction in the conceptualization of building the relationship. In the context of higher education, student satisfaction, as a driver of student loyalty, has been one of the strongest influencers in retention of customers. Thus, uses the disconfirmation theory in order to measure antecedents of satisfaction. In the other words, satisfaction as a function of the size and direction of disconfirmation experience, where disconfirmation is a function of the 'gap' between customers' expectations and perceptions (Brady & Robertson, 2001). A study by Yusoff et al., (2013) has put forward a definition in an oversea students' context, which is a feeling that the international students may or may not achieve the expectations of faculty with regards to issues they faced such as university culture or living in the host country. Based a study by Giese and Cote (2000), in reviewing the theories on satisfaction, there are 3 elements are common: (i) type of responses (i.e. cognitive or emotional); (ii) whether the response concerns a particular focus (i.e. expectations and consumption experience); (iii) the satisfaction occurs at a given time. Petrick (2004) found in the meta-analysis that the disconfirmation paradigm is the best predictor of customer satisfaction. Ekinici et al., (2004) cites Oliver's updated definition on the disconfirmation theory, which states "Satisfaction is the guest's fulfilment response. It is a judgement that product or service feature, or the product or service itself, providing a pleasurable level of consumption-related fulfilment including levels of under or over fulfilment."

Basically, satisfaction is the result of direct experiences with products or services, and it occurs by comparing perceptions against a standard (i.e. expectations). Mattila and O'Neil (2003), discussed that amongst the most popular satisfaction theories is the 'disconfirmation theory', which argues that satisfaction is related to the size and direction of the disconfirmation experience that occurred as a result of comparing service performance against expectation. Research also indicates that how the service was delivered is more important than the outcome of the service process and dissatisfaction towards the service often simply occurs when guest's perception do not meet their expectations.

#### ***b) Sociocultural and psychological adjustments***

What is adjustment? Adjustment is a complex and multi-faceted concept. According to Ramsay, Jones & Barker (2007), adjustment refers to the dynamic processes that can ultimately lead to achievement for an appropriate fit between the person and the environment. Millen & Berger (1997) mentioned in their study that the period of transition (Baker & Siryk, 1999). Most researchers who study regarding adjustment would advocate that all such indicators can be used simultaneously to ensure that more comprehensive picture of a student's adjustment can be obtained (Tinto, 1996). Ward and Kennedy (1999) are among many writers to argue that there is limited consensus and clarity as to what adjustment means, as the construct has been described and measured in varying ways and from several perspectives. Most of the writers tend to approach the study by looking at two (2) domain proposed by Ward & Kennedy (1999) which in the university especially for students represents a separation from patterns and norms which is associated with experiences when the behavioural pattern of the university

context have not been fully established. In addition, adjustment can be measured by students' personal/self-reports (from their personal application form) for their attachment to the university, academic performance, participation in extracurricular activities and psychological well-being. In fact, the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaires (SACQ) is a self-report instrument has been created/designed purposely to capture and measured such a multifaceted view of adjustment known as sociocultural domain and psychological domain. Most writers hold the view that adjustment is a transitional process in which students learn on how to overcome psychological distress and how students can learn to make the necessary adjustment to the challenges that they encounter in their studies. Cross-cultural adjustment was redefined as the process through which an individual acquires an increasing level of fitness and compatibility in the new culture, including the adaptation of culture shock, psychological adaptation and interaction effectiveness (Kim, 1988; Chen, 1990). According to Anderson (1994), examination of adjustment among international students can best be described as the dynamic and interactive process, one which tries to find the "fit" between the person and the environment. Ramsay et al., (1999) mentioned in their study that the contention of students' positive experiences will help them to facilitate the students' adjustment process in their new environment. In the other words, it can be described as an adjustment that fit between students and their academic environment.

The idea that international students experience transition and adjustment difficulties when engaging in educational education is not new. International students found adjusting to academic stress, cultural differences, and language challenges within the United States higher education system as their three most significant challenges (Zhai, 2004). The idea that international students experience transition and adjustment difficulties when engaging in international education is not new. As the example, studies on attitudes and social relations of foreign students have been conducted by previous researchers as early as the year of 1963 (Selltiz, Crist, Havel & Cook, 1963). Adjusting to a new culture can be so challenging and stressful experience and may put international students at a greater risk than students in general. Lin and Yi (1997) has mentioned that international students face common as well as their own unique problems such as racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, dietary restrictions, financial problem, misunderstandings and loneliness. Furthermore, coming from different cultures, they (international students) cannot get rid or cannot escape from cultural shock and will facing many astounding barriers. In addition, they are concerned about the well-being of their families besides they worry about securing employment upon graduation. Based on Pedersen (1995) study, he mentioned that "culture shock" is the process of initial adjustment to unfamiliar environment. The term of culture shock was coined in the academic literature by anthropologist Oberg (1960). He invented the expression in order to define the kind of uncertain and troubled feeling, which generally occurs when people are faced with difficulties while organizing their routine schedule in a new cultural environment.

According to 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. Socio-cultural adjustment refers to experiencing culture shock, discrimination, and getting used to new values, norms, holidays, and customs. Personal psychological adjustment refers to depression, feeling of isolation, homesickness and frustration whereas academic adjustment is having difficulty with learning

a new educational system, lack of language proficiency and acquiring new learning strategies. Further, Pandian, A. (2008) mentioned that, pattern of studies on international students' adjustment usually highlights issues of culture shock, intercultural experiences, academic performance, personality traits, cultural background and social interaction. A better understanding of how international students make the necessary adjustment is imminent in view of the ever growing international students' population in universities across the country each year. However, despite the large number of international students in Malaysian universities, Pandian, A. (2008) has pointed out that this does not necessarily translate to better inter-cultural interactions and understanding. Furthermore, the literature on international students' adjustment is mostly littered with research from overseas with focus on its antecedent variables (Jou & Fukada, 1996; Li & Gasser, 2005; Poyrazli et al., 2002; Polek et al., 2008) as well as the adjustment its outcomes (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006).

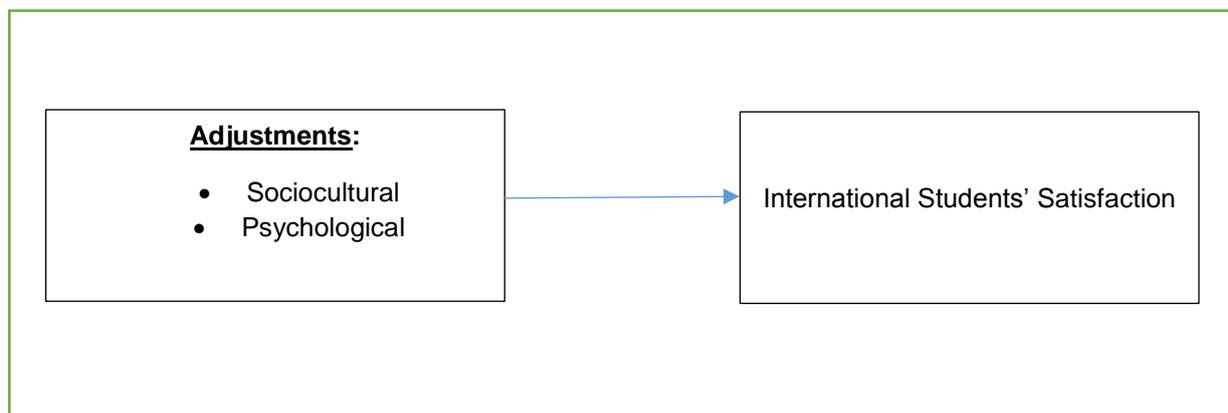
Sociocultural adaptation is best explained within social skills or cultural learning paradigm (Akhtaruzzaman & Monami, 2011). There are many authors have identified different domains of sociocultural adaptation. Black & Stephens (1989) were amongst the previous researchers who have researched intercultural adjustment in the management field. They defined sociocultural is known as the behavioural which is referring as an ability to fit in whereas psychological adjustment is the emotional which is referring to well-being, anxiety depression and fatigue. In the other words, Ward & Kennedy (1999) explained that sociocultural adjustment is viewed from a social learning perspective, predicted by variables related to cognitive factors and social skills acquisitions whilst psychological adjustment can be best understood in term of stress and coping framework, predicted and explained by personality and social support variables and life changes. Using the dimensions of psychological adjustments by Searle and Ward (1990), it offers a simultaneously understanding of the unpredictability and variability of this variable (psychological adjustment). Accordingly, using the dimension by Ward & Kennedy (1999) will make us be more understood about the reliability of the sociocultural approach to adaptation. It has also included more theory driven contributions by Berry (1997) on acculturative stress and Ward (1996) and associates (Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1996a) on psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

According to Yusliza and Shankar (2010), study on international students' adjustment while studying in foreign environment is widely research in developed countries like United States and Britain. Furthermore, a growing body of research has been carried out to study its determinants. But, less attention is given is given on how the international students adjust successfully especially in Malaysian public universities (Yusliza & Shankar, 2010). Other than that, only several adjustment issues among international students who are facing obstacles that has been highlighted to adapt the changes (Saloma & Amran, 2014). Thomas and Althen (1989) have added that the international students can suffer from a variety of adjustments issues. There are depression/helplessness, hostility toward the host country, anxiety and over identification with the home country, withdrawal, homesickness and loneliness.

As a social issue, a number of researchers have paid attention on adjustment issues faced by oversea students (Mehdzadeh & Scott, 2005). In order to adjust to a new environment is often a big issue for overseas students, not forgetting that this is a time consuming process. Based on the previous research by Fang (2010), 85% oversea students felt that the culture of the host country is different from their homeland. In that study, only 10.5% respondents were able to adjust to their host culture within 3 months, and 21.2% needed more than 1 year. Therefore,

for this study, researcher focus only for sociocultural and psychological adjustments faced by international students in Malaysian universities.

### ***Conceptual framework development***



**Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework**

Based on the discussion above, a graphical explanation is drawn to depict the proposed conceptual model. The development of the proposed framework on adjustments was derived from literatures on international students, students' satisfaction, and adopted theory on customer satisfaction which is known as confirmation/disconfirmation theory. Drawing on an in-depth review of the past studies, this framework suggests that the domain adjustments are the key factor that will sustain and improved the satisfaction among international students in Malaysian universities.

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

The higher education institution in Malaysia is now experiencing a competitive and commercial environment due to increasing the number of international students' enrolment who are pursuing their studies in this country. As students have more choice, it is imperative that the higher education sector in Malaysia not only aim to attract new students, but also retain the current ones. It has been documented that international student fees can contribute to national economy. Therefore, it is crucial for the Ministry of Higher Education to pay greater attention for the adjustments and transition issues as well as the satisfaction among international students. Based on the thorough review of previous studies, this paper intensely depends on the adjustments among international students towards satisfaction of the services provided for them. Hence, the researcher has proposed the framework which conceptualizes that both of the domain adjustments (sociocultural and psychological) and its become as the major contributors to the satisfaction among international students in Malaysian universities. As the number of international students are increasing from time to time, the need to understand and to address theirs sociocultural and psychological adjustments to this country become so important. An adjustment is indeed a complex process and students must quickly learn to adapt so that they can live comfortably in the host country. The Malaysia higher education/universities need to take on social responsibilities to go beyond attending to administrative matters but also they need to address intercultural adaptation. Less intention is given on how international students adjust successfully during their studying time in Malaysian universities. Furthermore, only several adjustment issues among international students whom

are facing difficulties or obstacles has been highlighted in term of adapt changes in Malaysian universities. Moreover, limited effort has been made in order to conceptualize and explore international students' satisfaction in Malaysian higher learning institutions (universities). In conjunction to the above matter, the Malaysia educational sector needs to require acculturation programs and structured support system as well. Even though, it is a crucial moving and it will be one of the challenging task for them (the management of Malaysia education sector) but it will help the international students to adapt and make their adjustments with Malaysian learning environment smoothly. Researcher recommend for future studies could include other possible dimensions or new variables which suitable in order to extend proposed model further purposely for international students' satisfaction in Malaysian universities. In addition, it is highly recommended by the researcher that future researchers will validate the proposed framework with the use of advanced statistical methods, such as structural equation modelling, smart-PLS and in depth interviews to obtain the robust results in order to provide useful insight and good guidelines for Malaysian universities in managing international students in this country. In addition, the findings of future research will bring the better understanding among future researchers as well as the academicians and postgraduate students in concerning this interesting topic, while highlighting the potential antecedents that may not only facilitate the achievement of international students' adjustments and their satisfaction but also it will attract potential customers in the near future.

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