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EXPLORING ACCULTURATIVE STRESS IN PURSUING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: A CASE STUDY AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY, MALAYSIA

Nurul Farhanah Mohd Nasir [1], Nur Diyana Mustapha [2]

[1]   School of General Studies, Asia Pacific University
       Email: nurul.farhanah@staffemail.apu.edu.my
[2]   Department of Business and Information Science, FOBIS, UCSI University
       Email: amzar@uum.edu.my

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Abstract:

A growing number of international students' in Malaysia's private education institution caused concern on how they adapt to the new environment at this young age. This indicates the stress of acculturation and how participants developed and engaged in a better understanding of the new culture. For this study, the sample will be obtained by utilizing the Foundation in Arts international students at one of Malaysia's private universities. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews where ten foundation international students were chosen by using random sampling. Been enlightened by the issues of culture shock or drop-out from universities due to acculturative stress problems, this study is conducted to fill in the loops so that it will figure out problems as well as providing solutions for the international students. This paper expecting themes such as language barriers, cultural barriers and perceived discrimination are among the problems that caused them to face this problem.

Keywords:

Acculturative Stress, Language Barriers, Culture Barriers, Perceived Discrimination

Introduction

Trend of receiving international students studying in Malaysia has been growing from time to time. People are no longer bounded by the expectation of studying in the home country only, rather to gain experiences by choosing other hosting country as the best place to widen their experiences and developing their own well-being. International students are "persons admitted

by a country other than their own, usually under special permits or visas, for the specific purpose of following a particular course of study in an accredited institution of the receiving country" (Statistics of International Migration, 1998). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has defined the international students are those "who have crossed a national or territorial border for education and are now enrolled outside their country of origin" (UNESCO, n.d). The growing number of foreign students has brought benefits to Malaysia in different perspectives such as its benefits on Malaysia economy system (Naceur, 2009; Samuel, et. al., 2011). Other than that, choosing Malaysia as a host country for international students has given a positive impact on its reputation and ranking of the Malaysia's higher institution (Yusliza & Shankar, 2010).

Currently, Malaysia's higher institution is now being among of the best option for international students to be enrolled with. According to statistic from Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, the number of international students enrolled to private higher institutions in Malaysia has increased in its number, where in 2017, total intakes were 45,090 students compared to year 2014, with 10,854 students enrolled to private higher institutions in Malaysia (Perangka Pendidikan Negara, 2014). Why Malaysia? Based on series of research conducted earlier, there are push and pull factors which motivate internationals students to study at Malaysia. Despite of low tuition fees and Malaysia is a good hosting country (Muhammad Zeeshan, et.al., 2013; Samuel, et. al., 2011), the other pull factors were due to Malaysia's reputation on her higher institutions' student's wellbeing.

Unfortunately, the transition to university is thought to be stressful for many students, particularly if this involves leaving home (Fisher, 1994). Students move away from home probably for the first-time need to adjust to a new social environment and at the same time working on maintaining their academic performance (Ross et al., 1999). Stress is always referring to exceeding human ability to cope with something and it has been defined as the physiological and psychological reactions to certain events in the environment that caused the subject to feel tension, pressure or may affect the life mentally and physically (Hussien & Hussien, 2006). Stress might bring and perceive as dangerous and threatening to the well- being (Tenibiaje, 2011). According to World Health Organization (2019) almost around 20 percent of children around the world were estimated by to have mental health problems. Worst, 1 over 10 people are now having moderate or severe mental disorder such as depression, anxiety to psychosis. This supported by previous studies that stress is strongly associated with poor mental and physical health (Cohen et al., 2007; Slavich et al., 2010). Stress is one of the chronic issues that affect university student's life which could be reflected in student social, academicals, and mental health. Linn and Zeppa (1984) found that stress can lead to academic decline, poor social relationships and poor health performance (Muhammad Saqib, 2018; Maajida Aafreen, Vishnu Priya, Gayathri., 2018). With the increasing diversity of international students, a study of this nature is essential for the advancement of knowledge in the field, as for Malaysia as the country aspires to recruit 250,000 international students in higher education (Kaur, Noman, & Nordin, 2017).

Reflecting to the issue discussed earlier, this research paper will enlighten the issue of acculturation and the impact to academic performance. As adjusting to a new culture can be challenging and stressful experience, this research paper will focus on the international students, where at their young age, students must adjust, adapt and lives in different atmosphere. Looking at the measures to cope with this situation, there are international students who are left behind struggling alone in adapting to their new environment. Relating to this situation, it further caused problems especially when international students has become some

drop-out students or even quitting from the institution and went back to their home country. These situations, not only affecting the institution's standard operation, but also country's name, especially when we knew that words can sell things better than marketing itself. Concerning to few cases of returning international students without even completing their studies has motivated researchers to find the reasons behind this event. Due to different factors, adaptation to a new environment may lead to stress.

To investigate more, three objectives has been outlining to guide this paper, as well as to find out the real situations happening to those international students who studied here. Three objectives are:

1. To explore the acculturative stress among the international students and its impact to the academic performance.
2. To outline the challenges among the international foundation students.
3. To find the best solutions to overcome the challenges based on international students' experience living in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Previous studies show the experiences of international students who study abroad (Nasirudeen, et. al., 2014; Poulakis, et. al., 2017; Fisher, 1994; Ross, et. al., 1999). Experiencing living abroad from the families at a young age may cause different difficulties to individual (Nasirudeen et. al., 2014; Berry, et. al., 1987). They are among the international who travel abroad with the aims of continuing their studies. According to the UNESCO (2006), Global Education Digest (2006) and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2006), international students are the those who flee outside their country for education. This operational definition is widely used in this paper as they are the main subjects discussed in this research.

Significantly, as an international student, the hardest emotional part attached to these people are missing different aspects of family life such as food, holidays, physical connection, or emotional support (Sovic, 2008). Common problem brought up by the previous literature is culture shock where they were anticipated with the anxiety of leaving their family for their studies (Oberg, 1960 cited in Sovic, 2008). However, from the positive sight, they were better and quick in making supportive group of friends involving various race, ethnicity, or nationality to replace the "family" in their new hosting country (Nasirudeen, et. al., 2014).

Unfortunately, due to certain challenges encounter by these students, some of them having problems to adapt with the new condition of life. Since stress may cause due to several reasons such as culture, climate, language, food, cost of living (Zuria Mahmud, et. al.; 2010; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Tseng & Newton, 2002; Lin & Yi, 1997), this research paper concern about the acculturation practices which starts in the beginning of life of a traveller. Acculturation in its earliest classic formulation comes from Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits, (1936: 149) cited in Lakey, (2003: 104):

> Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups.

Unfortunately, when individual seems to have issues to cope with the acculturation, this is where the acculturative stress happening, particularly to the international students who are having difficulty to adjust themselves in a new environment (Berry, et. al., 1987).
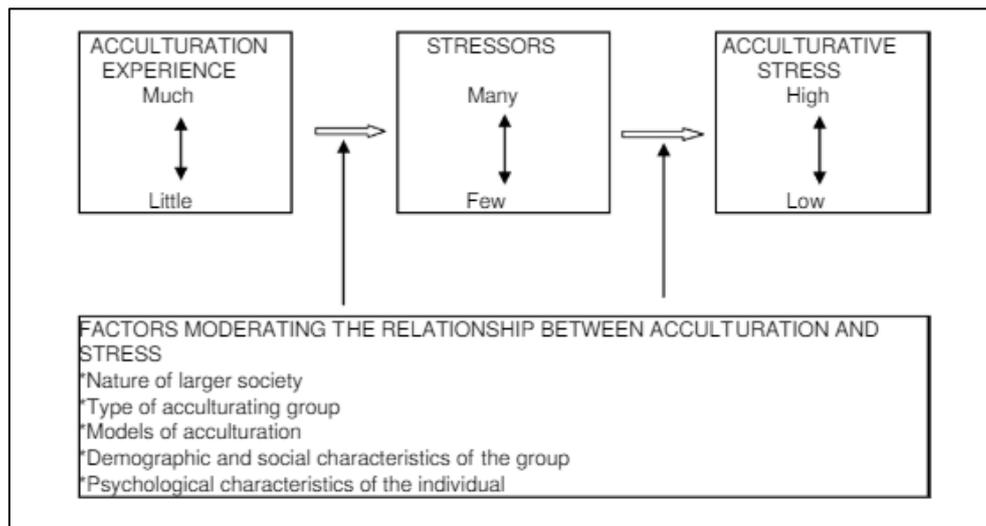
Figure 1.0: Berry's Theoretical Conception of Acculturation and Stress
Source: Berry, J. W., et. al. (1987)

In this theory, Berry (1987) illustrated the acculturation experience may be affected due to surroundings (which is the stressors). If individual cannot cope with the many nor few stressors (where in this theory indicate the factors affect the level of acculturation and stress) of intensity, this will lead to the emergence of acculturative stress.

Language constraint is the most challenging issue for international students (Mori, 2000). An adaptation to the host language is a benchmark for successful adjustment in a new culture (Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, & Pisecco, 2001). One of the renowned languages is English, which is widely used in the universities and less proficiency in the language will become the stressor factor to the students to study abroad which may lead to acculturative stress. Individuals who are less fluency in language experience have probably faced with difficulties which bring higher levels of acculturative stress. According to Mori (2000), students who is lack in language proficiency may face the difficulty with their host countries' language and contribute to acculturative stress. Host's accent is another difficulty for the international students, especially during the class learning and discussions. From some previous studies among Asian international students in the United States shown that a lack of adequate language skills may cause low self-esteem, which may lead to anxiety and depression (Lin & Yi,1997). In addition, Korean American elders are reported to have higher levels of depressive symptoms than other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., Jang, Small, & Haley, 2001; Min, Moon, & Lubben, 2005).

Apart from language constraint, different in culture may cause some dilemma to the international students. For example, if the student study away from their home country, they might experience cross-cultural and in need get to know new things. Good integration and communication between international students and local students may lay benefits both due to mixing to other cultures (Russell, 2005). The different culture is a unique benefit and sometimes contribute to difficulties which has a negative major impact in life so called cultural shock (Pruitt, 1978). The acculturation condition needs to deal with characteristic of local society and characteristic of the immigrant group itself for adjustment. According to Pedersen (1995), "culture shock is the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment". Culture shock is a psychological reaction to unfamiliar cultural norms encountered in

unfamiliar environments (Furnham & Bochner, 1986, as cited in De Araujo, 2011). Not all values and behavioral practices in the host culture are compatible with those in the home countries of the international students. Differences in mannerism and communication may cause culture shock for international students. However, cultural shock is not the only barriers that may lead to acculturative stress. Different in educational system may also lead to the acculturative stress where they could not cope with the unusual educational system as their country practice (McClure, 2005; Huang, 2006; Hamad Alghamdi & Suzanne Otte, 2016).

Transition of the students from their origin country to host university environment could cause a psychological, academic and social shock to them, since different in cultural system. According to Brown and Uehara (2012) from Asia and Margolis and Nagel (2006) from United States showed that any changeover to the new education system has a direct impact on the schooling system, the educators and students' performance. The potential of discrimination might occur when there is a loop of differences. Greater levels of discrimination and prejudice are likely to occur among international students who are different cultures from local nation. Because of discrimination, students may feel less motivated to interact with local students, which can lead into isolation/alienation and loneliness (Constantine et al., 2005; Klomegah, 2006; Mallinckrodt & Leong, 1992; Mori, 2000).

Methodology
Data collection is the most important part in research. This study uses qualitative method to guide the study. Due to the need of intense explanation especially on respondent's life experiences, the researcher chose this method to understand better on the acculturative stress face by the international students. Sampling were chosen among the international students at the above-mentioned institution. For this research, purposive sampling technique has been used to obtain the data. This technique also known as judgement sampling (Tongco, 2007; Ilker, et. al., 2016). According to Tongco (2007), researcher will need to set up the criteria upon its sample before they began their data collection. To further this, specific criteria of respondents has been outlined before-hand. Respondents were selected among international students who have stayed in Malaysia for at least 6 months and currently doing their foundation studies in the said institution.

To begin with, the researcher has explained in detail to the respondents about the anonymity of this study as well as signing a consent form. Ideally, the researchers expecting ten respondents to participate in the data collection. Regrettably, only eight respondents available while two respondents withdraw from this research. Deemed by the time constraint, the researchers have conducted two series of in-depth focus group interview with four respondents in each session. According to Anderson (1990) cited in Rana Muhammad Dilshad & Muhammad Ijaz Latif (2013: 191), focus group interview is "a group comprised of individuals with certain characteristics who focus discussions on a given issue or topic". Respondents were given a list of questions as a tool for reference and each of them will respond to the discussion. The discussion lasted for one hour and thirty minutes.

The use of the sampling gives advantages where it helps in giving generalization from the sample selected earlier to the findings of this paper (Gaganpreeet Sharma, 2017). Meanwhile, by using focus group interview, it gives extended explanation where respondents were responding to each statements and discussion brought forwarded in the session through their own words (Rana, et. al., 2013).

Findings

The findings from this research indicates there are three major factors which will lead to acculturative stress among international students at this private institution, Selangor, Malaysia.

Language Barriers

There are two respondents who had a very serious language barrier when they first came to Malaysia due to their native language is not English, but Arabic and Chichewa.

> *"For the rest of my life, I only spoke in Arabic. When I first arrived here, I was accompanied by my parents, they know a little bit to speak in English. But, when they leave me, I was about to cry, because I really cannot communicate in English. Luckily, I found another Arabian-mate in this campus. So, for few months, I totally depend on her. But, until today, I still have difficulties to understand lecture because lecturer speaks too fast and use sophisticated vocabulary." (Respondent 1, Female, Egyptian)*

> *"When I came here, I was so nervous because I do not know whether I can communicate or not with people. It is like putting a knife on my throat when my parents leave me after I registered in this campus. Rarely to find someone from Malawi, so it is hard for me to make some friends due to this language barrier. I will always make sure that I have handphone with me, so that I can google translate things that I need. Trust me, it is hard. But now, I believe I can speak well in English. It is all because of the struggle. Thanks to my hard experiences (laughing)." (Respondent 2, Female, Malawian)*

Knowing that both having struggle due to their non-native English speaker, the researchers query on their options to study at Malaysia rather than other countries.

> *"I was fascinated by how my friends says about Malaysia. The Islamic values, the way they treated women, where we got freedom to pursue studies. So, my parents decided to send me here." (Respondent 1, Female, Egyptian)*

> *"I also heard the same thing from my friends back in Malawi and after reading some reviews about Malaysia. That is why I chose Malaysia." (Respondent 2, Female, Malawian)*

Based on these findings, the researchers found that this is the common problem face by the international students, especially those who came from the non-native speaker country. Since communication is the essential thing in teaching and learning exposures, students need to cope up with the difficulties by findings ways to solve this problem. Among the common solution by the respondents were to use mobile dictionary to translate while interacting and learning in the class.

Cultural Barriers

Most of the respondents responded that they feel uncomfortable when they first arrived here due to different in language, climate, social values and behaviour which caused them to have some trouble in the first early months. This is compatible with the findings by Daya and Badiolah (1994), where they mentioned about these in their article.

> *"I am having difficulties in food because at my country, we ate spicy food, but not too spicy like here. But here, it is hard for me to find it. And here, it is too meaty. So, when*

there is no food suitable with my appetite, I lost few weights and I cannot focus on my studies. Still, until today, I am looking for food which is okay for me." (Respondent 3, Female, Iraqi)

"Well, for me, since I cannot find suitable food like what we had in our country, we ate McD. I know, it is not good for our health. But, rather than starving and keep on thinking about finding food, why not switch our preferences. And I think, we survived till now (laughing)" (Respondent 4, Male, Pakistani)

Other than having food problem, the other common thing raised by the respondents were social relationship.

"Sometimes, it is hard for me to communicate due to language barrier. So, I cannot make friends. It put me in a hard time because I feel so lonely and isolated from the community, I mean, classes" (Respondent 5, Female, Egyptian)

"Yeah, I had the same issue like her. I cannot make any friends here. Maybe because I am too straight-forward when I am not satisfied with things, or maybe I complaint so much. Not only the Malaysian does not want to be friend with me, my country-mate also did the same thing to me (laughing). At the end, I struggle alone." (Respondent 6, Female, Syrian)

The second sub-themes found under cultural barriers highlight about having and maintain good social relationship. This is aligned with Constantine (2005), which mentioned in their study about the importance of maintaining good relationship could help in reducing acculturative stress which may cause health problem or mental problem.

Perceived Discrimination
Being an outsider do have some tendencies to get mistreated by the local people, especially if we are living in homogenous country. However, at Malaysia, knowing as a heterogeneous country, it decreases the possibilities to be mistreated but there is always tendency to receive the unequal treatment. Five out of eight respondents have shared their experiences as an international student where Cho (2009), in his findings did highlighted this finding as one of the causes which creates acculturative stress among international students.

"I think I had very bad experience when it comes to unequal treatment here. For example, until today, I did not receive my students' card. I kept on asking them, but they said it will be ready by such dates. But, when I go again, it is not there. And then, I met new friend and he is local student. He entered today, a week after, he received everything. So, where is mine?" (Respondent 7, Male, Pakistani)

"Yeah, I agree with him. I had problem with my bank-card. Until today, they cannot solve it because they said I am a Syrian. So, what is the different between Syrian and Iraqi? Or maybe Malaysian? Due to this problem, it is hard for me to get my money from my parents. I need to get help from my friends here." (Respondent 6, Female, Syrian)

"Some people show hatred because of my skin colour. Not all black people are Negroid and bad people. I came here to study, and I am from Malawi. Why such things happen

here? Maybe, if I go to America, I will face the same problem too, but, I did not expect for it to happen at Malaysia." (Respondent 2, Female, Malawi)

Discrimination is one of the common things discussed during the discussion. Having this problem may lead to problem such as academic stress where students were wandering to find solutions for their stay here. Feeling isolated, hatred and discrimination may eventually lead to acculturative stress and ultimately may instigate acculturative stress among international students especially on academic. According to Sovic (2008), academic shock may happen among the international students due to different system of teaching and learning. Considering the difficulties that students had in their life, difficulties like academic shock might also occur among these students.

With all the acculturative stressors highlighted in the above discussion, all respondents mentioned that it has affected their academic performance:

Language Barriers & Academic Performance
"As I am not fluent in English, it really affects my studies. I need help. We need help. But we do not know where to. If I complaint to student affairs, they might assume that I just need to attend English class. But it is more than that. Theory and practical is not the same thing, especially on language. Core subjects in English. What should we do?" (Respondent 1, Female, Egyptian).

"Our teacher sometimes teaches too quick. English is not our language, so, sometimes we are struggling. But I like when teacher can repeat their syllabus. For instance, if I met them personally, they will try to teach us again and again. I believe, language barrier does affect our academic performance, but you have to know what to do. Meet them, consult with them and learn." (Respondent 7, Male, Pakistani).

Cultural barriers & Academic Performance
"Well, even though I admit that I have this problem, but, I do not think this factor will affect my studies. When you decided to leave abroad, you have to make sure that you are capable to adjust to the new environment and culture too. So, I don't think so…" (Respondent 2, Female, Malawian).

"Let us enjoy the cultures in our new place. As simple as that. If you feel like cultural barriers will affect your academic performance, I advise other Pakistani not to come to Malaysia. (laugh)" (Respondent 7, Male, Pakistani)

Perceived Discrimination & Academic Performance
"Apart from the other two factors, I strongly believe this will affect our studies. Why? Because we are living apart from our parents and family. If people here, for instance, cannot help us, then, who should help us?" (Respondent 6, Female, Syrian)

"Yeah, discrimination which we received somehow does affect our study. For instance, the student's card issue. If I were to use facilities like library, the librarian will ask for my student's card to access the main door. Or, if I were to borrow a book, I can never get that. So, it is disturbing issue". (Respondent 7, Male, Pakistani)

Discussion

The results indicate that all the respondent experience of acculturative stress. Perhaps the international students do not manage to completely successful transition to Malaysian culture due to the short time period which did not give the ample time to adjust or develop social networks with the locals to build connectedness. Basically, the foundation programme just only for one year. To lower their stress due to changes or cultural barrier, possessing self-determination can help the international undergraduates to act and motivate themselves to face pressures and challenges that come with the distance from family and their struggle to survive without the support they are used to back home in avoiding stress due to change or culture shock in a new environment. The student mostly shall find the friend and create the relationship with the same country and local people to replace their family. It is important to socialize and built connection with course mate in ways to reduce or avoid acculturative stress during transition process.

Since language is related to the society and culture in which one lives, when people communicate in the same language, they create relationship through communication and social life. Language barriers can develop into acculturative stress as indicated by the studies. The university's intervention from cross culture programme in reducing the acculturative stress which tailoring them to other local culture and other languages. Besides, the activities may reduce the gaps between the local and international students and provide them with suitable teaching and learning methods to reduce their fear or difficulties.

Implications

From the findings, we found there four immediate implications for higher education policy and practice.

First, the institution or university's team should determine the international student experiences on their campus are similar or differ from the findings. Mixed of student and university cross culture could produce varying patterns of engagement that deviate from the results of this study.

Second, a campus cannot simply recruit a critical mass of international students, but it must also intentionally arrange its resources so that international students feel benefit and appreciated. On the one hand, increasing the number of international students on campus makes it more likely that students from different parts of the world can find peers with similar backgrounds and interests, allowing them to more readily form affinity groups that are the foundation for a social support system. However, simply increasing the number of international students will not necessarily enhance the quality of many aspects of the undergraduate experience, as shown by the research on structural diversity (Chang, 2002; Gurin, 1999). Thus, any effort to increase the numbers of international students on a campus must also be accompanied by programs and services that induce these students and their American counterparts to engage with one another as well as in other educationally purposeful activities.

Third, the effects of both high and low density should be further investigated and monitored by campus. Low density may contribute to social isolation and an over-compensation on academics while high density could contribute to an inordinate amount of socializing by members of some groups which can have an adverse effect on academic performance. Helping international students achieve the appropriate balance is the goal. Research on international student friendship patterns suggests that international students prefer friends who are from the same country or region of the world, even though socializing with American students tends to enrich the overall quality of their experience (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985; Gudykunst &

Hammer, 1988). Additional studies are needed to understand how and why density affects student engagement on campuses, especially the counter-intuitive finding that campuses with high proportions of international students are viewed as less supportive by all students.

Finally, the researchers determine the occurrence of gaps that contribute to socialize relationship between international and local students. We found that the students are spending more time in socializing in their same nation and less time participating in diversity-related college activities compared with their counterparts from different countries. According to previous studies, it is indicating that spending time with friends is highly valued among Asian student (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). Mostly, Asian students might ignore or avoid the local or different country students. Hence, the faculty need to encourage to promote the mingling of Asian international students with other students from different cultures or backgrounds to actively collaborate in the group study, assignment or projects. Besides, Student affairs personnel might put some action to design the programs and activities to bring Asian students into contact with other students in their student's life. Most campuses, for example, will celebrate the different of cultures and races.

Identifying international students should be one of the interests by the lecturer when they are handling a class. This is due to different in educational system may affect the interest of students to learn in the institution. This paper recommend that responsible lecturer should take this as an important consideration as Laad & Rudy (1999) and Trice (2000) mentioned in their studies that teaching-learning method can be a barrier to international students to be excel in their studies. Institutions should also modify their method when welcoming new international students. This is due to the findings in this research saying that they did not feel home when they leave their country to pursue their studies. By enhancing the teaching-learning method, it will create better experiences by the international students (Khairi Obaid Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, C., n.d.; Liu, M & Redfern, B., 1999).

Conclusion

Ideally, this paper aims at outlining the problems encounter by the international students once they chose and live in Malaysia. Students may struggle with finding their niche at a university while slowly making the transition into adulthood, and this can be a difficult road at best. Understanding the acculturative stress may help the educators to be alert with the need of their international students, as well as helping the institution of the host country to provide elements which makes these students comfortable in their new homeland. Apart from aiming at improving our country's economic condition, preparation and improvement of programmes to welcome the international students should always be there as an initiative to embrace the outsiders. This paper believes, if the institutions could provide better facilities, amenities and social support to the international students, good impacts will be spread over by these students where at the same time it helps in promoting our own country. Social support has been found to be a significant way of dealing with academic and psychological stress (Adelman, 1988; Rui & Wang, 2015; Van Gorp, Boroş, Bracke, & Stevens, 2017). Social support is considered a psychosocial coping resource that positively affects individuals' personal resources such as self-esteem and self-efficacy and buffers the negative effects of stress (Rubio & Lubin, 1986; Thoits, 1995). A lack of social support has been found to be prevalent among psychologically distressed people and thus they are more likely to feel socially isolated (Kawachi & Berkman, 2001; Seeman, 1996). Based on the results, we provide some practical suggestions on facilitating the adjustment process of international students. Institutions of higher learning should provide numerous social support structures and introduction activities that provide information regarding the educational culture of the institution. Programmes such as mentor-

mentee, home-coming and exchange local-international students would be best to help the international students understand and accept the difference they may encounter ahead.

Unfortunately, there are limitation in this study. First, due to short time frame, this paper could not extend longer in collecting its data. Therefore, out of 10 students, this paper only has a focus group discussion with eight students. With these number of students, it hardly represents the whole population of international students studied in Malaysia. The findings also may only relevant to Malaysia's higher institution especially on the part of educational system that we impose to the international students studied at Malaysia. With small sample size, which may not have accurately reflected a comprehensive view of international students as a whole.

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