

**COPING WITH TRANSITIONS: A STUDY OF
INTERNATIONAL UNDERGRADUATE
STUDENTS AT A PRIVATE INSTITUTION**

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UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT A PRIVATE INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

The intensity of the transition experience faced by international students is attributed to the multiple fronts of challenges faced including the change of academic systems, sociocultural adjustments and limited access to familiar support due to distance and situation. This research was an in-depth study of the experiences of international students at a Malaysian private tertiary institution during the transition period of moving in, moving through and moving out of a university environment. It explored their lived experiences, ascertained their challenges and identified the resources, in the form of assets and liabilities, and other factors that influenced these experiences. Due to the exploratory nature of the objective, the phenomenological design was adopted not just to explore but to interpret their lived experiences. Data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with 19 undergraduate students who were at different stages of the transition experience. The Theory of Transition by Nancy Schlossberg, which espouses studying how individuals approach a transition in terms of the impact and the changes the transition brings to their life, was used as the theoretical framework. This study reveals a dynamic journey of continual growth and progress which unfolded throughout the transition experience. To a certain extent, this growth was made possible due to a balance of experiences consisting of difficult challenges at one end of the spectrum and enjoyable memorable moments at the other. Other factors that made growth possible were the assets and liabilities in their possession, identified based on Schlossberg's 4 S System: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies. These factors did not act in isolation; they interacted in various combinations. Of particular novelty among the findings is the streamlining of challenges into categories of Psychosocial, Administrative, Physical and Academic (PAPA). The findings led to the identification of systems that work and those that need work. Although this study focussed on the

students of one institution, some of their experiences were influenced by government policies that were applicable to all private tertiary institutions. When it comes to institution-specific elements, the systems that work are essentially ‘best practices’. For the systems that need work, further discussions need to be held since many of these originate from policy-level decisions that affect the transition experience of international students in Malaysia.

APPROVAL

I certify that I have supervised / read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in quality and scope, as a thesis for the fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis submitted in fulfilment of the PhD degree is my own work and that all contributions from any other persons or sources are properly and duly cited. I further declare that the material has not been submitted either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university. In making this declaration, I understand and acknowledge any breaches in this declaration constitute academic misconduct, which may result in my expulsion from the programme and/or exclusion from the award of the degree.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EMGS	Education Malaysia Global Services
ETHOS	E-Theses Online Service
ICR	Inter-coder Reliability
IDV	Individualism (Index)
IELTS	International English Language Testing System
IES	Institute for the International Education for Students
IRR	Inter-rater Reliability
LGTBQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning
MPU	<i>Mata Pelajaran Pengajian Umum</i>
MyTO	Malaysian Theses Online
OPAC	Online Public Access Catalogue
PAPA	Psychosocial, Administrative, Physical and Academic
PDI	Power Distance Index
TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USA	United States of America

CHAPTER 1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, internationalisation of higher education has played an ever-expanding role in the pursuit of providing quality education that is relevant and meets the needs of the globalised world. There are many aspects of internationalisation including student mobility, cooperation in academic and research activities and exchange of staff, projects and knowledge (Whilborg & Robson, 2017). For an immersive experience of internationalisation that would have a deeper effect, a stint abroad is preferable. However, the majority of staff and students of institutions of higher learning would not have the opportunity to go abroad for an academic experience (S. Robson et al., 2017).

This lack of opportunity is recognised by higher education policymakers and institutional practitioners and as such, much emphasis has been given to promoting the recruitment of international students. This aspect of internationalisation, one of the initiatives under what is commonly known as the Internationalisation at Home movement (Agnew & Kahn, 2014), provides opportunities for local students and staff to interact with an international community at a more meaningful level. The presence of international students adds a different dimension to the study environment. It enriches the social experience for the general student population by adding diversity to the classroom. Their presence also helps enhance the curriculum and improve the quality of teaching and learning (Sawir, 2013). As such, “international students” is often a criterion in ranking exercises including those by QS and Times Higher Education (QS, 2018; Times Higher Education, 2017).

International students also create a significant economic impact for the host country. Besides the income that is generated by tuition and other academic fees charged by institutions, the expenses these students incur in paying for their living

expenses also generate income for the nation. The hospitality industry also gains a significant amount not only through the holidays taken by the students themselves but also from visits of their friends and family (Migration Advisory Committee, 2018).

One of the ever-expanding benefits of international students for a host nation is the creation of a diverse talent pool. “The desire for talent from host countries and institutions is even more openly manifested nowadays when knowledge has become the most powerful driving force for the economic development of society” (Bian, 2017, p. 145). From this pool of talent, the host country could choose the best candidates who have proven themselves academically and are already familiar with the local culture.

With the many benefits that international students bring to the institution and the country, it is no wonder that the recruitment of international students is a major endeavour for many nations. In providing for these international students, the host nation and institution have certain responsibilities and accountabilities. It is important for there to be clear knowledge and understanding of the experiences that international students go through in their host country for there to be effective efforts at continual improvement.

1.1 Background of the study

Malaysia’s efforts at internationalisation have been a few decades in the making. Sirat (2008) maintained the year 1996 as the starting point for the steady increase in international students. Coincidentally, 1996 is the year that Act 555: Private Higher Education Institutions Act and Act 556: Lembaga Akreditasi Negara Act (later replaced by Act 679: Malaysian Qualifications Agency Act) were enacted by the Government of Malaysia. These acts regulate the private higher education industry with a focus on the quality of education provided. Since then, private higher education institutions have played a significant role in attracting international students, especially

at the undergraduate level. This is partly due to the enrolment policy of public universities where the total number of international students was capped at 5% of the total population at the undergraduate level (Sirat, 2008).

Intensification of internationalisation efforts with the aim of being an international centre of education excellence started in the early 2000s. It was one of the seven thrusts in the National Higher Education Strategic Plan: Beyond 2020. Back then, the government aimed for at least 10% of the total student population to comprise international students, with a target of 100,000 students by the year 2010, 150,000 students by 2015 and 200,00 students by 2020 (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2007). In 2015, a new plan was launched using the overarching Malaysian Education Blueprint 2013-2025 as a framework. The Malaysian Education Blueprint (Higher Education) 2015-2025 continued the focus on internationalisation and listed Global Prominence as one of the 10 shifts. In the document, the government's aspiration of attracting 250,000 international students by 2025 was declared (Ministry of Education, 2015).

One of the initiatives of the government to attract international students to enrol in educational institutions in Malaysia was to introduce the Education Malaysia Global Services (EMGS). Officially established on 13 April 2012 by the Ministry of Education, EMGS was formed to complement the Ministry's Education Malaysia Division in "promoting education diplomacy and the internationalization of Malaysian education sector through various efforts such as academic and research collaborations between Malaysian education institutions and international bodies abroad" (Education Malaysia Global Services, 2019, para. 1). At the operational level, EMGS has been tasked to be the sole body that liaises with institutions and students in facilitating visa processing. Despite teething problems in the early days of its formation featured

prominently by Malaysian news agencies (Yuen et al., 2014), EMGS has since improved its performance with the reduction of last-minute approval, turnaround time charter of 14 days to process a complete application, and provision of real-time and online tracking of applications (Chin, 2019).

Due to these efforts, Malaysia is one of the top 10 countries for international students for the years 2014 to 2016 based on data available from the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (2019a). (Note: There was an error on the statistics for the year 2016 where a figure of 253,287 students was listed for Angola which put that country as 4th in the list. Clarifications were sought and it was confirmed that this figure is invalid (D. Ghania (Statistical Assistant, Sciences Technology and Innovation Unit, UNESCO), personal communication, April 11, 2019) and as such, Malaysia which would have been at No. 11, moved up a spot to No. 10). In 2001, the number of international students in Malaysia stood at 18,242 (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi Malaysia, 2011). By 2018, the number had increased to 170,898, out of which 131,514 were enrolled as full-time students at institutions of higher learning. Out of this figure, 30% were enrolled at public universities, while the majority of 70%, numbering 103,198, were at private institutions (Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 2019).

The international students' market is getting more competitive. Globally, the number of international students, as of 2016, stood at 4.94 million (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2019b). By 2025, the Organization for Economic Development estimated that eight million students would pursue their studies in a country other than their own (Tremblay et al., 2012). It is projected that over the next decade (starting from 2018), the international student market would generate an income of US\$1 trillion (Dennis, 2018). Considering the economic impact alone, it is no wonder that many nations who are not in the top 10, aim to have a slice of this pie while the current top nations are also

intensifying efforts at recruiting international students. Some non-English speaking countries, including those in Europe, do this by offering more programmes in English while others, including Germany, China and Russia, are becoming more popular due to their economic presence and savvy international outreach strategies (ICEF Monitor, 2017).

Students choose to study abroad for a variety of reasons. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) built on McMahon's (1992) models to categorise these reasons into push and pull factors. Push factors include the prestige placed on international education, an inability to obtain a place in a local university or a preferred field of studies, a wish to develop a greater understanding of the host country and a desire to migrate. Other push factors include a poor economic environment as well as a disruptive law and order situation in the home country, and the desire for personal growth, better career prospects and improved language skills (Eder et al., 2010; Lam et al., 2011; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002).

Among the pull factors which help students determine the destination country and subsequently institution of choice include the profile of the host country (reputation, climate, geographical proximity, cultural and social ties, safety and security) and the attractions that the host country has to offer (travel, lifestyle, entertainment) (González et al., 2011; Jamaludin et al., 2018; Lesjak et al., 2015; Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). The cost, including tuition fees and living expenses, was considered as a pull factor by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) but was categorised as one of the structural factors by Eder et al. (2010) as it could be considered as a constraint. The other structural factor included was visa or immigration-related processes.

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) also included recommendations from family and friends as a determiner of the destination of choice. The friends who could influence

the choice of a potential international student tended to be those who have had experience living in the host country as an international student. Their lived experience played an important part in attracting students to a particular country as part of word-of-mouth marketing. This proves that all international students have the potential to serve as ambassadors of Malaysian education. A positive international student experience is essential for this to happen.

1.2 Problem statement

Generally, all students find the transition from a high school to a tertiary environment challenging (Briggs et al., 2012; Venezia & Jaeger, 2013; Wangeri et al., 2012). For international students, this transition experience is more intense due to the multiple fronts of challenges that they face including the change of academic systems and requirements, sociocultural adjustments and limited access to support from family and friends due to distance and situation (Ahrari et al., 2019; Mahmud et al., 2010; Tas, 2013). How do they cope? What strategies do they use? What support has been provided to and found useful by them?

Some of these issues have been investigated by scholars in their specialised fields. Acculturation and adjustment issues faced by international students during their stay in Malaysia have often been studied. Ahrari et al. (2019) provided an overall picture of the different types of adjustments that postgraduate international students had to make in the form of academic adjustment, psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment. GulRaihan and Sandaran (2018), who termed the categories slightly differently as language, academic, environmental adaptation and interpersonal, measured their impact on sociocultural adaptation of a sample comprising 75% postgraduate and 25% undergraduate international students. The impact of post-arrival strategies (open-mindedness and flexibility) and pre-departure factors (travel

familiarity, religious and cultural similarities, knowledge and awareness of the host country) on adjustment efforts of international students was studied by Mohamed (2020). Out of 25 participants, only one was from a private university.

Another study on factors affecting sociocultural adaptation was conducted by Ong and Cheong (2018) who identified social skills, cultural empathy, interpersonal communication, survival skills (in handling their day-to-day needs) and campus involvement as the main elements impacting acculturation. Freeman, Nga and Mansori (2019) focussed on academic adjustments and how they were impacted by self-efficacy, language proficiency, social support and psychological state of mind. The participants of both these two studies were from private institutions of higher learning.

Related to adjustment and adaptation are stress and mental health issues. Khosravi et al. (2018) studied newly registered students at a public university and found that quite a substantial portion were in psychological distress with severe depression being the most prevalent symptom as compared to other indicators (somatic, anxiety, social dysfunction). Focussing on the role of social support in dealing with acculturation stress and adjustment, Lashari et al. (2018) found that friends played a significant role in providing emotional and informational support that helped international students in their psychological adjustment.

Students' academic success and failure are also topics that generated much interest. J. K. N Singh (2020a) conducted a qualitative study on the experiences of academic failure of postgraduate students of a Malaysian research university. Students attributed the failures to issues with supervision and mismanagement, which ultimately affected their motivation to progress and state of mental health. Another of her studies looked at resilience, a trait that helped the participants of her study overcome challenges to progress towards academic success. Methods utilised by these postgraduate students

included actively seeking solutions to integration and communication issues as well as seizing the opportunities and support systems provided by the university (J. K. N. Singh, 2020b). Studying factors that impact learning sustainability, Yassin et al. (2020) found that intercultural learning challenges had no significant influence on sustainable learning. Instead, the study, which involved a sample of 273 students from both public and private institutions out of which 93% were enrolled in postgraduate programmes, found that issues related to language proficiency, research skills and academic processes and systems negatively affected sustainable learning.

The struggle with language, especially academic English, is a frequent topic of choice amongst linguists and language specialists. The academic writing skills of postgraduate students were the focus of study by Kotamjani et al. (2018) and M. K. M. Singh (2015). Both these studies linked the difficulties to reliance on previous learning patterns and interference from their native languages. In another paper, M. K. M. Singh (2019) approached the issue from the lecturers' perspective who indicated the struggles that international students faced included those that relate to academic writing conventions and the interpretation of the read text. Another perspective on language difficulties was provided by Taly and Paramasivam (2020) who investigated the cause of speaking anxiety and the strategies used by international students enrolled in postgraduate programmes at a public university to overcome this difficulty.

These research papers represent a cross-section of issues faced by international students enrolled in Malaysian institutions that have often been investigated by scholars. However, in terms of sample or participants, the majority of research was focussed on public university and/or postgraduate students as could be seen by the research of Ahrari et al., 2019; Khosravi et al., 2018; Kotamjani et al., 2018; Lashari et al., 2018; J. K. N. Singh, 2020b, 2021; M. K. M. Singh, 2015, 2019; Taly &

Paramasivam, 2020 and Yassin et al. In the above sample of papers, only Ong and Cheong, 2018 and Freeman, Nga and Mansori, 2019 focussed on international students at private institutions.

This study aimed to fill the gap of knowledge in terms of focus on international students enrolled at private institutions of higher learning. The study took a broad approach in identifying challenges, coping strategies, and supportive structures that are deemed important by these students. It hoped to provide a wider insight into the transition experiences, where the concept of transition was based on a broader interpretation of moving in, moving through and moving out of the whole experience of studying and living in Malaysia as an international tertiary student. Thus, the participants of the study included, not just students in their initial year, but also those who were in the middle as well as at the end of their studies.

Another issue that was addressed centred around the assertion of Saad, Yunus and Embi (2013) that Malaysia was still at its initial stage of research focussing on international students as compared to Australia which was at its third phase. They claimed that the Malaysian studies on international students were broad and general in nature compared to the breadth and depth of studies available in traditional host countries like Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand and the United States of America (USA).

One way to determine the stage of research on international students for Malaysia was to use the statistics of postgraduate theses or dissertations that focused on international students as a basis. To do this, a search was conducted from February to April 2019 on the Malaysian Theses Online (MyTO) database, a portal established by the *Persidangan Perpustakaan Universiti dan Perpustakaan Negara* that compiles theses of public and private universities, and all available online public access catalogue