INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS CHALLENGES AND ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT: *This study examines the association between academic adjustment and socio-cultural, psychological, social support and self-efficacy challenges faced by international students while studying at a private education institution in Malaysia. A total of 788 international students from various countries and regions completed a questionnaire and regression analysis shows that self-efficacy is the most significant factor affecting international students' academic achievement level followed by social support and psychological adjustment. However, socio-cultural adjustment shows no impact indicating low cultural distance. With this, there are practical implications that can be drawn from this study.*

KEYWORDS: Socio-cultural Adjustment, Psychological Adjustment, Social Support, Self-efficacy.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has an average ratio of almost 1:10 international versus domestic students – one of the highest proportions in the academic world. As on December 2014, Malaysia recorded 135,502 international students from about 160 countries studying in public and private higher education institutions and international schools[1].

While moving to a new and foreign country for further education is often looked upon as an enriching experience, many international students have to overcome the challenges related to their adjustment experiences which can be overwhelming and filled with uncertainties. They face many complex challenges, especially if the culture of their host country is strikingly different from that of their home country[2,3].

The main purpose of this study is to identify the major challenges that international students face while trying to adapt to studying in Malaysia, and, to examine its relationship with their academic adjustment.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In an early study, Paige [4] defined international students as individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship to participate in international educational exchange. The many different challenges that international students face is known as the acculturation process where psychological and cultural changes take place as a result of two or more cultures coming into contact[5].

Socio-cultural Adjustment

According to Nasir[6], socio-cutural adjustment can be referred to as healthy interpersonal relationships with the host society. Cultural adjustment is said to also include the process of understanding and incorporating behaviours, values and beliefs of the host culture[7].

A study by Nasir [8] in Islamabad found that the ability to adjust to the local food and severe weather conditions can affect the academic achievement of international students. Nasir's [6] study on the effects of cultural adjustment on academic achievement provide evidence that there is a significant relationship between cultural adjustment and the academic achievement of international students.

Cultural adjustment can include issues like using a fork rather than fingers to eat, and, driving on the right side instead of the left side of the road[9]. Lewthwaite [10] argued that the language ability of a student is one of the determinants of a student's ability to adjust to the new culture.

Psychological Adjustment

Going to university can be a major adjustment and take a toll on the psychological well-being of students and can cause stress, anxiousness, and even depression. The impact is typically higher for international students than for home students[11]. Yeh [12] found that European students studying in the U.K. reported experiencing less acculturative stress than those from Asia and Africa, while Constantine, Anderson and Utsey[13] found that non-European international students who had experienced discrimination, this led to low self-esteem, depression and other mental problems. This encouraged international students to form groups with other international students rather than with the local students.

Students also used a variety of coping strategies. They place photos of family and friends on their walls or computer screen savers, listen to music in their native language, or used Facebook or Skype to connect with family and friends[14]. There are also consistent findings which show that religious involvement is associated with positive mental health outcomes[15].

Social Support

Research indicates that social support has a large influence on how first year students adapt to their new environment [16,17]. In looking at the predictors of anxiety and depression among international students, Sumer et al.[18] found that students with lower levels of social support reported higher levels of depression and were more likely to have higher levels of anxiety.

In fact, Rajapaksa and Dundes [19] discovered that international students were more prone to feeling lonely and homesick than domestic students who stayed away from home. As Bektas, Demir and Bowden [21] found, maintaining a connection with family and home community was essential to adjustment in a new environment.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura [22] as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." And, according to Pajares [23], beliefs may determine the outcome of a task more than capabilities, because belief greatly influences effort.

In an early study, Bandura [24] found that students with high levels of self-efficacy in regards to their ability and personal competence were at a lower risk for emotional maladjustment. As such, during a stressful transitional adaptation to a different culture, self-efficacy plays a critical role in protecting against negative experiences, emotions and health impairment [25].

According to Khan [26] and Komarraju and Nadler [27], one contributing factor to academic success is the individual's level of self-efficacy. Students with high academic self-efficacy have shown to perform better academically. In addition, according to Chemers, Hu and Garcia [28] if a student is confident in doing well in college, they are more likely to succeed.

Academic Adjustment

Severiens and Wolff [20] found that students who feel at home and are able to connect well with fellow-students and teachers tend to perform better academically. Further, Wilcox *et al.* [29] found evidence that the support of family and friends has a positive influence on the academic performance of international students.

Khan [30] conducted a research on the influence of of self-efficacy and socio-cultural adjustment on the academic achievement of international students in Malaysia. The findings of the study provide evidence that gender, self-efficacy and socio-cultural adjustment have a significant effect on the international student's academic adjustment.

Cultural Distance Theory

Cultural distance was first defined by Babiker et al. [31] as the distance between the culture of origin and the host culture. According to Suanet and Vijver [32], cultural distance and adjustment show statistically significant associations.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a cross-sectional survey methodology to investigate the relationships between socio-cultural, psychological, social support, self-efficacy and international students' academic adjustment. The respondents are international students from a private higher education institution in Malaysia. The questionnaire comprised of six sections and was adapted from various instruments such as the Socio-cultural Adjustment Scale (SCAS), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS), Multidimensional scale of Perceived Social Support, and the General Self-efficacy Scale.

A pilot test was first conducted based on a sample of 50 international students. The results of the reliability test showed a Cronbach alpha value of more than 0.7. A readability test was further conducted to ensure that the questionnaire was suitable for international students.

RESULTS

The demographic analysis shows that the 788 respondents were mainly from China, Indonesia, west Asia, Nigeria, and a smaller percentage from other countries. In terms of their length of stay, 21.3% of respondents have been in Malaysia for 6 months or less, 19.9% of respondents have been in Malaysia for 6 months to 1 year, while 31.5% of respondents from 1 to 2 years, 17% from 2 to 3 years and 10.3% for more than 3 years.

Table 1 shows the mean, internal consistency and reliabilities of the variables. In response to their socio-cultural adjustment in Malaysia, most respondents indicate having just a slight difficulty. Their responses to the statements on psychological adjustment, social support, self-efficacy and academic adjustment indicates that the respondents lean towards agreeing with most statements.

Table 1: Cronbach's Alpha and Descriptive Statistics

Variables	Mean	Cronbach Alpha	Skewness	Kurtosis
Socio-cultural adjustment	2.42	.95	0.39	-0.29
Psychological adjustment	3.17	.83	-0.25	-0.17
Social Support	3.57	.93	-0.48	-0.05
Self- efficacy	3.43	.93	-0.47	0.1
Academic adjustment	3.38	.83	-0.33	-0.05

A factor analysis was conducted to investigate the factor loading of each indicator. In tandem with this, the factors with low factor loadings were removed.

Multiple Regression Analysis

The original hypotheses predicted a significant and positive correlation between academic adjustment and the four constructs. Table 2 shows the results of the regression analysis.

Model	R	R^2	Adjusted R^2
1	.699	.488	.485

Table 2: Regression Results between Socio-Cultural Adjustment, Psychological Adjustment, Social-Support, Self-Efficacy and Academic Adjustment

Independent Variables	Standard Beta
Socio- cultural adjustment	-.04
Psychological adjustment	.11***
Social support	.12***
Self- efficacy	.52***

Note: ***p<.01

The regression model is statistically significant, R^2= .488, Adjusted R^2 = .485. The adjusted R^2 value of .485 shows that the independent variables are able to account for 48.5% of the variation in the dependent variables. Out of the four independent variables, psychological adjustment (ß = .11, p<.01), social support (ß = .12, p<.01) and self-efficacy (ß = .52, p<.01) had a significant and positive relationship on the academic adjustments of international students. However, socio-cultural adjustment is rejected. Self-efficacy had the highest explanatory power followed by social support and psychological adjustment. Further, a multi-collinearity test was run and shows that the VIF of each construct are less than 10, indicating that there is no multicollinearity problem.

DISCUSSION

The overall empirical results suggest that socio-cultural adjustment is not statistically significant and does not significantly affect the academic adjustment of international students in Malaysia. This indicates that most international students face only a slight difficulty or may not face any difficulty in socio-cultural adjustment. In other words, they adjust fairly well from a socio-cultural perspective.

However, Nasir's [8] research suggests that socio-cultural adjustment can have a significant effect on the academic adjustment and cultural adjustment of students. A possible explanation for this study's contrasting findings is that most of the international students at this institution are from the Asian region, i.e. mainly from China, Indonesia and west Asian countries. As such, the social and cultural challenges they face are minimal owing to Malaysia being a multi-racial country. This result also supports the Cultural Distance Theory and it can be concluded that the cultural distance between the international students' own cultures and the host culture is perceived as low and hence their ease of adjustment to the culture in Malaysia.

The findings show that self-efficacy is the most important determinant in predicting international students' academic adjustment. The outcome of this research is similar to previous findings by Khan [26] and Komarraju & Nadler [27]. These studies found self-efficacy to play a critical role in the overall better academic achievement and adjustment of international students. This is an important finding as self-efficacy is a reflection of their confidence in their own ability, their self-belief and personal competence which is an important driver toward international students' academic adjustment.

The overall results show that social support is the second most important factor influencing the academic adjustment of international students. The majority of students agreed that the support they receive from family and friends is important to their academic adjustment. This result corresponds with the findings of Severiens and Wolff [20] who found that international students who have strong social support are more likely to successfully complete their studies. Given that 41% of students at this university have been in Malaysia for less than one year, it is important that they receive strong social support as social support has a large influence on how first year students adapt to their new environment.

The final result shows that the relationship between psychological adjustment and academic adjustment of international students in Malaysia is positive and significant. In addition, the indicator, "I am satisfied with my life" had the highest factor loading for this variable (0.818). This implies the level of concern that international students place on their life satisfaction.

In discussing the results of this study, while the sample size adequately contributes to the reliability of the statistical analysis, interpretations should be made with caution as the sample was taken from one private institution of higher learning in Malaysia.

4.   CONCLUSION

Given the findings, academic institutions could focus on intervention services to provide international students with a productive and memorable learning experience in Malaysia. Since happy and satisfied students will speak positively about their alma mater, institutions of higher learning could work to create programs that promote contact between new international students and their own communities which is crucial at the entry point of these students. The surprise finding was that socio-cultural adjustment is not significant in

influencing the academic adjustment of international students in Malaysia. Given this, there are practical implications that can be drawn from a marketing and promotions perspective, i.e., there are a vast number of countries in the Asian region which can be explored.

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