

PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS: A CASE STUDY ON POST GRADUATE INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT UNIVERSITI SAINS MALAYSIA (USM), PENANG, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT: *The transition from the homeland to abroad for educational purpose is psychologically challenging, and brings psychological distress in the form of anxiety and depression. The level of this psychological distress varies from person to person. This study aims to explore the Psychological distress level of postgraduate international students at Universiti Sains Malaysia. A descriptive survey approach was employed to conduct the research. The population of the study consisted of all postgraduate international students currently studying at Universiti Sains Malaysia. A convenient sampling technique was used to draw the sample from the population. All together seventy international students, (39 males and 41 females) participated in the study, who have spent at least six months at Universiti Sains Malaysia. Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), including ten close, ended questions on five points Likert scale with a Chronbach alpha value of 0.88, was used as an instrument to collect the data from postgraduate international students. Descriptive statistics are used to evaluate the distress level of postgraduate international students. The results revealed that according to Kessler's cut off values, postgraduate international students are on the borderline from normal wellbeing to mild Psychological distress level, and there is no statistically significant difference between male and female students. The results reflect that Universiti Sains Malaysia has a conducive environment for postgraduate international students for their psychological adjustments.*

Keywords: Psychological distress, postgraduate international students, Universiti Sains Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia has become an educational hub for Asian, and African continents and is attracting foreign students from these regions. Malaysia is attracting international students because Malaysian universities use English language as a medium of instruction at postgraduate level, Secondly, Malaysia is a multicultural country with a mixture of Islamism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. In addition, Malaysia is close to South East, Middle East, and East Asian countries based on the geographic location, international students' enrolment has dramatically increased and Malaysia has become the second most popular educational hub to host international students in the region following Singapore [1].

In addition, there are a variety of international joint degree programs both at the undergraduate and postgraduate levels requiring cooperation between Malaysian higher educational institutions and foreign universities from the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, Canada, France, Germany and New Zealand [2].

International students may set high and unrealistic expectations towards a new situation, if those expectations are not met accordingly, brings depression and anxiety to students. Positive early experiences are associated with better adjustment outcomes. In this context, family and friends play an important role in one's ability to adjust to new life situations. Students who are strongly attached to their family and friends tend to have a smoother transitional phase into a new culture. The ability to connect with others may help alleviate feelings of isolation, and homesickness. Maintaining good relationships with family, friends, and the community while studying abroad may help during the adjustment process. International students' experience is unique. Both learning style and environment are important factors in determining the students' academic adjustment, students' psychological well-being was significantly associated with the length of stay in the host country [3].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Mental health and other biological and environmental factors are predictors of psychological distress among foreign students. According to Stallman [4], heads of university counselling services in Australia reported a rise in the proportion of students with "serious psychological issues". During the process of adjusting to a new environment, depression and anxiety are commonly experienced by the students. Mostly international students experience, culture shock, loneliness and biological complaints such as headaches and digestive disorders (which are a manifestation of psychological symptoms in some cultures). In a review of research on the psychological adjustment of students studying in foreign countries, Church [5] found that the most common problems experienced by the students during the adjustment process included, financial problems, language barriers, adjustment to the new educational system, homesickness, adjustment to social norms, and racial discrimination. Some international students struggled with depression, anxiety, academic difficulties, relationship issues [6], loneliness, and cultural adjustment [7] while adjusting to their host country. The website of the 2011 National Summit on the Mental Health of Tertiary Students states:

"Rising numbers of students are seeking out university counselling and health services, including students presenting with mental illness, self-harming behaviour, and suicidality.. The picture is complex and requires new interpretations and new responses. Academic difficulties can of themselves lead to personal problems, which in turn may take on a life of their own and require direct intervention above and beyond academic and study skills response [8]".

According to Lee, Park, and Kim [9] a significant gender difference exists between Korean international college students' psychological adjustment. Korean female students

exhibit a higher level of psychological adjustment as compared to their counterpart males.

Individual differences play a major role in psychological adjustment. Individuals with extrovert personality often find it easier to cope up with the new situations. Openness towards the new environment is a significant predictor of psychological adjustment [10].

Parker, Pettijohn, & Rozell [11] found that students scored higher on emotional intelligence predicted better intercultural growth. Krägeloh, Shepherd, and Billington [12] found that Asian international students were more likely than European college students to utilize religious coping and that this style of coping was more efficient for improving their psychological well-being and quality of social life. The international students' use of coping skills such as acceptance, reframing, and striving was associated with better cross-cultural adjustment, higher self-esteem, positive problem-solving appraisal, and lower maladaptive perfectionism prior to the acculturation process significantly predicted acculturative adjustment for Chinese international students [13].

Resilience is another concept that helps to understand the individual differences in psychological adjustment. Resilience refers to the ability to bounce back following difficult experiences (e.g., adversity, trauma, stress). According to Masten, Best, and Garmezy [14], "resilience is the process of, capacity for, or outcome of successful adaptation despite challenging or threatening circumstances", Resilience is often negatively associated with psychological adjustment problems [15].

Depression was found the most frequently reported issue, followed by acculturation. According to Han, Han, et. al., [16] 45% of Chinese international students in their study reported symptoms of depression, and 29% reported experiencing some symptoms of anxiety. Sa, Seo, Nelson, and Lohrmann [17] reported that stress, anxiety, and depression were predictors of South Korean international students' smoking prevalence.

Coping style influences psychological adjustment. Folkman and Moskowitz [18] defined coping as the thoughts and behaviors used to manage the internal and external demands of situations that are appraised as stressful. Students utilize different styles of coping to deal with adjustment issues. Individuals generally engage in what Lazarus and Folkman [19] called emotional-focused and/or problem-focused coping. The difference between the two types of coping styles lies in the assumption that emotional-focused coping tends to lessen the emotional response associated with the situation while problem-focused coping tends to eliminate or reduce the actual situation causing the distress. Locus of control also effects how the students cope with their stressors. Those who have an internal locus of control may feel more confident to cope with their stressors than those who have an external locus of control, who tend to make external attributions for their problems.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To evaluate the psychological distress level among postgraduate international students of USM.
2. To Identify Psychological distress based on gender difference.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Does postgraduate international students at USM experience (mild, moderate, severe) psychological distress during their student candidature at USM?
2. Is there a gender-based difference in psychological distress level?

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

A descriptive survey approach was employed to collect data from the international students. A convenient sampling technique was used to collect data from students. A total of 70 international students from different nationalities, Pakistan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Kashmir, Jordan, Iran, Yemen, Syria, Korea, China, Japan, Srilanka and Nigeria, participated in the study. The Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10), including ten close, ended questions, ranging from (1; None of the time) to (5; All of the time) on five points Likert scale, validated by Bougie, E., et. al., in 2016 [20], with a Chronbach's alpha value of 0.88 was used to collect data from the participant respondents. The data obtained from the students was analyzed by SPSS (version 20).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results revealed that postgraduate students at Universiti Sains Malaysia are on the borderline from the normal well being psychological state of mind to mild Psychological distress level. According to Kessler's scale; a score of 20 and below stands for a normal mental well being, students having a score from 20 to 24 are likely to have mild psychological distress, students having a score from 25 to 29 are likely to have moderate psychological distress and students having a score of 30 and above are likely to have severe psychological distress.

Table 1: Mean score of psychological distress of students

Number of respondents (N)	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
70	13.00	33.00	20.7612	5.15758

According to table one, the mean score for the psychological distress of students is 20.7586, which shows a borderline value between a normal mental well being to mild psychological distress.

According to table two, the highest frequency of score is 33, observed by one respondent, and minimum frequency observed is 13 by five respondents.

According to table four the *t*-test for the comparison of mean scores of gender indicate an insignificant value when the confidence value is kept at $p < 0.05$, the result of *t*-test depict that there is no significant difference between the Psychological distress level of male and female international postgraduate students.

Table 2: Frequencies and parentages of responses

Frequency	No of Respondents	Valid percent	Cumulative Percent
13.00	5	7.1	7.1
14.00	3	4.3	11.4
15.00	4	5.7	17.1
16.00	7	10.0	27.1
17.00	6	8.6	35.7
18.00	4	5.7	41.4
19.00	4	5.7	47.1
20.00	4	5.7	52.9
21.00	2	2.9	55.7
22.00	7	10.0	65.7
23.00	4	5.7	71.4
24.00	3	4.3	75.7
25.00	6	8.6	84.3
26.00	4	5.7	90.0
27.00	1	1.4	91.4
29.00	1	1.4	92.9
30.00	1	1.4	94.3
31.00	1	1.4	95.7
32.00	2	2.9	98.6
33.00	1	1.4	100.0
Total	70	100.0	

Table 3: Comparison of mean scores of male and female Students.

	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Deviation
Male	39	13.00	29.00	21.0385	4.43578
Female	31	12.00	33.00	20.4839	6.06559

Table 4: t-Test for the comparison of means of gender.

	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	.444	.541	.516	4	.633

p<0.05

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research has investigated the psychological distress level of postgraduate international students at Universiti Sains Malaysia. The results of the study indicate that the postgraduate international students' Psychological distress is on the borderline of normal well being to mild distress level. This indicates that University Sains Malaysia has a conducive academic environment for postgraduate international students and reflects that students are satisfied with all academic, cultural, social and psychological aspects of their living at University Sains Malaysia.

Moreover, Psychological distress can be further minimized by hiring culturally sensitive counsellors, well aware of the problems faced by international students in order to develop a comfort level which can minimize the psychological issues.

The university can invite international students from other universities in Malaysia to exchange their experiences and be assigned as a mentor to facilitate new incoming international students.

The university should also invite senior alumni to exchange their experiences with the new students and arrange culturally sensitive activities to facilitate the adjustment procedures at university sains Malaysia.

It would be ideal for the universities/colleges and the students to work collaboratively on cultural, academic, and

psychological adjustment issues in order to foster a smooth transition.

Further, the research should be done on a larger scale to get a clearer and broader picture of the psychological issues of postgraduate international students.

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