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Cognitive Adjustment of International Students in a Malaysian Public University

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Abstract

This study contributes to the ongoing interest of research into the sociocultural adjustment of international students in host universities in Malaysia. This study examined the sociocultural adjustment of Yemeni postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university. This study adopts a quantitative design (a survey) in which a questionnaire was used to gather data. The data were analysed using SPSS. The results have revealed that the major aspects of cognitive adjustment problems faced by Yemeni postgraduate students in Malaysia include dealing with people of higher status, dealing with people in authority, and understanding the local accent/language. These cognitive adjustment problems can be attributed to postgraduate students' sociocultural and educational background.

Keywords: Sociocultural adjustment, cognitive adjustment, international students, higher education, Malaysia

Introduction

The importance of higher education as an essential tool for developing a knowledge-based society has resulted in a rapid increase in the number of international students pursuing their higher education worldwide. Various countries such as USA, UK, Canada, and Australia have already developed various programmes to attract international students (Sugimura, 2008; Mahfoodh, 2014). Similarly, some Asian countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, China, and Japan have initiated several strategies of attracting international students. As a result of the implementation of strategies of attracting international students to these Asian countries, there has been an increase in the number of international students in such countries. In Malaysia, for example, international students were 7,941 in 2006 and reached 29,662 in 2013 (Aziz & Abdullah, 2014). International students pursuing their higher education studies in institutions of higher education in Malaysia face a great number of diverse difficulties. This is because international students are a heterogeneous group of students who may face many challenges that may negatively affect their learning experiences (Pandian, 2008). As a result of this, international students' diversity should be treated as one of the essential concerns because these students have a tendency to experience various dilemmas in their educational ventures and social contexts. In spite of postgraduate students' desire to study and their intellectual ability, their overall academic efforts need to be guided in a direction that is culturally and socially aligned with the expectations of academic communities in Malaysian universities. Such guidance should be based on findings of studies focusing on international students' experiences and the difficulties they face in their academic pursuits. Although research on the areas of difficulties faced by international students in study abroad programmes has yielded various interesting findings, the need for more studies on international students' adjustment, both academic and sociocultural, has been emphasised by various researchers worldwide. For example, Churchill and DuFon (2006) still stress the importance of further research in this area. Here we need to consider that the need for studies on international students' adjustment stems from the fact that each context has its own characteristic features that may make it entirely different than other context. So, international students' sociocultural adjustment challenges in any Asia-Pacific region may not be similar to those of international students in other contexts, such as US or Australia. Studies on international students in Malaysia (refer to Pandian, 2008; Kaur & Sidhu, 2009; Yusoff & Chelliah, 2010; Pandian, Baboo, & Mahfoodh, 2013; Mahfoodh, 2014) have pointed out that there is no precise study which examines the cognitive adjustment of international students in Malaysian institutions of higher education. Thus, this study examines the cognitive adjustment of a group of international students in a Malaysian public university.

Literature review

Sociocultural adjustment is a measure of behavioural competence in the new culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1999) and it refers to the ability of a sojourner to fit into the host culture, to acquire skills that are appropriate in the new culture, and to navigate daily aspects of life in the new

environment. According to Ward and Kennedy, sociocultural adjustment is best understood within a social skills or cultural learning paradigm. It is influenced by factors related to culture learning and social skills acquisition in the new culture, length of residence in the host culture, cultural knowledge, amount of interaction and identification with host nationals, cultural distance, language fluency, and choice of acculturation strategies (Ward & Searle, 1991; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Cultural distance refers to the extent to which one's culture of origin is different from the host culture (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Sociocultural adjustment frequently increases quickly among sojourners during the first months in a new culture, but gradually levels off as culturally appropriate skills are learned (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Ward and Kennedy (1994) found that sojourners in New Zealand experience less difficulty with sociocultural adjustment when they identify strongly with host nationals. Difficulties in sociocultural adjustment are greater in sojourning groups (i.e., international students or expatriate employees of multinational organizations) compared to sedentary immigrant groups (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Baker and Luke (1991) conducted a study in the Australian context and focused on examining the academic and social difficulties of urban and rural students. They collected data using a structured questionnaire which was administered to 105 Chinese students, 105 urban Australian students, and 112 rural Australian students. Their study revealed that the Chinese students admitted that the social difficulties they faced were due to their behaviour in having attraction in following Australian norms and culture rather than Asian cultural norms. Similar to the findings of other studies that focused on international students in Australia, Baker and Luke (1991) found that factors related to differences in the cultural systems of the host country and international students' countries have been a major obstacle for students' socialization of their academic literacies. In another study in the Australian context, Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, and Ramia (2008) interviewed 200 international students from more than 30 different nations at nine Australian institutions. The interviews covered a range of areas pertaining to social and economic security, financial problems, accommodation, languages, networks, family, and authority. Their study builds on the findings of earlier studies on the loneliness experienced by international students in Australia. They found another dimension of loneliness that was related to cultural loneliness in which international students felt loneliness due to the fact they were away from their native culture and native language. In other words, the students felt that they lacked their linguistic competencies and the cultural adjustment, which could affect their progress and their learning.

In a Canadian university, Myles and Cheng (2003) employed twelve interviews to address the social and cultural life of 12 non-native English speaking international graduate students. Specifically, they investigated the students' social life, their relationships with supervisors and instructors, and their experiences in communicating with colleagues and friends. Myles and Cheng found that non-native English speaker students' adjustment depends on factors such as mixing with host students and cultural differences. Although international students had little contact with students from the host country, there was a relative well-adjustment to university life. The results also showed that non-native English speaking students had no problems in

communicating with their supervisors. Myles and Cheng suggested that preparing students for life in a new culture should include intercultural elements to facilitate their academic and social lives in the host country. Similar to Myles and Cheng (2003), Novera (2004) conducted a study in the Australian context to explore the perceptions of students regarding their problems in adjusting to the sociocultural life in Australian universities. After the analysis of data, Novera found that the participants had fewer problems in adjusting to sociocultural life in Australia than to its educational demands. However, unfamiliarity with host nation cultural norms and cultural difficulties can be counted as factors of Indonesian students' sociocultural adjustment.

In the US context, Li and Gasser (2005) examined factors affecting 117 Asian international students' sociocultural adjustment. The study employed Sociocultural Adjustment Scale (SCAS) to explore students' sociocultural adjustment, contact with the hosts, ethnic identity, and cross-cultural self-efficacy and found that Asian international students' adjustment in US context is a dynamic process that is influenced by a host of factors. In addition, Li and Gasser revealed that successful sociocultural adjustment is affected by cross-cultural efficacy and students' contact with the hosts. The study suggested that Asian students' contact with the hosts partially mediated the relationship between their cross-cultural self-efficacy and their sociocultural adjustment. Focusing on international students' adjustment, Zhang and Brunton (2007) focused on measuring reported levels of satisfaction about their experience of education, accommodation, living costs, host country relations, and leisure activities during their time in New Zealand. In another study, Brown and Holloway (2008) found that stress was high in the initial stage of the academic sojourn. This was caused by the struggle to cope with the challenges of foreign language use and an unfamiliar academic and sociocultural environment at a time when students were beset with homesickness and loneliness. In a third study on international students' sociocultural adjustment in New Zealand, Campbell and Li (2008) showed that the participants in the interviews reported having difficulty making friends with local students in New Zealand. Kim also revealed that international students' limited English language skills affected their engagements with others.

Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, and Sabatier (2010) examined the adaptation of students by comparing samples of international (Vietnamese) and domestic (French) students in France. The study examined two broad sets of variables which could be predictors of the adaptation of students in a new sociocultural environment. The first set included dispositional variables, such as facets of personality and adult attachment as well as psychological distress. The second set of predictors consisted of more contextual variables such as satisfaction with social support and cultural identification. Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, and Sabatier found that sociocultural adjustment was predicted both by attachment intimacy (for French and Vietnamese students) and ethnic identification (for Vietnamese students). One distinctive aspect of the acculturation model in their study is the use of psychological distress not as an outcome but as a predictor of sociocultural adjustment of students.

Studies on international postgraduate students in Malaysia

Studies on international students in Malaysian public universities have focused on the academic and social problems faced by international students when they pursue their higher studies in Malaysia. Focusing on international students in two public universities, Kaur and Sidhu (2009) examined postgraduate students' learning experiences in their M.A and M.Ed degree programmes. They found that the major problems students faced were (1) pressures of undertaking and coping with the requirements of postgraduate work, (2) the initial difficulties encountered when adjusting to a new environment and academic culture, (3) the problems of reading and comprehending academic texts in a critical manner and (4) writing using appropriate language. However, their study did not focus solely on international students but also on Malaysian postgraduate students. Studying psychological and sociocultural adjustment problems among international students, Yusoff and Chelliah (2010) found that the factors that affect international students' psychological and sociocultural adjustment problems are English language proficiency, social support, and some personality variables. They also found that all these variables have their effects on international students' academic achievements. In another study, Yusoff (2010) examined the relationship between demographic factors and sociocultural adjustment and found that international students who reside in Malaysia between 18 and 24 months differ significantly in impersonal endeavours and cultural relatedness. However, the findings have shown that gender and marital status did not differ with the three dimensions of sociocultural adjustment. Although Yusoff (2010) focused on international students in Malaysia, the respondents in this study were all undergraduate students. Other studies on international students in Malaysia include Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, and Ishak (2010; 2011) and Thangiah (2010). Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, and Ishak (2010) focused on the challenges experienced by international students at three public universities in Malaysia. Using focus group interviews, they found that the major challenges of international students are culture, climate, and care. Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, and Ishak (2010) found also that few factors that include familiarity and similarity of culture, language ability, and efficient services at the institution can help students adjust better. In another study, employing a questionnaire and focus group interviews, Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, and Ishak (2011) examined 385 international students' campus adjustment in three public universities in Malaysia. They found that international students' adjustment problems included academic, emotional, and social. They also found that factors that affect international students' adjustment to Malaysian universities include communication with local society, the hot Malaysian weather, financial issues, culture, food, and cleanliness. In other words, international students reported that their major obstacles in sociocultural adjustment are related to the weather of Malaysia, the differences of cultural norms, and food. In addition, international students showed that their financial problems can be one of the major obstacles in their sociocultural adjustment.

Thangiah (2010) carried out a recent study on sociocultural adjustment of international students in Malaysia. Thangiah explored barriers to international students' sociocultural adjustment in

Malaysia. Focusing on students enrolled in an English proficiency course in a local private university-college offering both local and foreign degree programmes, Thangiah collected data employing questionnaires and focus group interviews. The questionnaire required the respondents to respond to (1) a demographic questionnaire, (2) an open-ended question requiring student to briefly describe their stay in Malaysia, and (3) a modified version of Ward and Kennedy's (1999) Sociocultural Adaptation Scale (SCAS). Thangiah found that the extreme sociocultural difficulties for international students are using transport system and dealing with the climate. In addition, Thangiah revealed that aspects of great difficulty adjustment are dealing with people in authority, dealing with departments and agencies, dealing with someone who is rude and unpleasant, finding suitable accommodation, dealing with poor or bad service, and communicating with other foreigners. Recently, Yusoff (2012) studied the psychological adjustment in international undergraduate students in a Malaysian public university and pointed out that understanding the experiences of international students can give feedback on designing and implementing programmes that can be useful to support international students' learning.

Method

This study adopts a quantitative design (a survey) in which a questionnaire was used to gather data. We selected this design due to some reasons. First, surveys have been used in several disciplines because they have been acknowledged as one of the essential tools for collecting data (Rea & Parker, 2014). Second, in quantitative research, data can be subjected to statistical analysis which can provide findings that can be generalized to the population of the study. In most cases, quantitative research is utilized to answer questions about relationships among measured variables with the intent of explaining, predicting, and controlling phenomena (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). Hence, the intentions in quantitative methodology are to establish, confirm, or validate relationships and to develop generalizations that can contribute to theory. The context of this study was a Malaysia public university and the target population in this university included all Yemeni postgraduate students pursuing their postgraduate studies in different fields, such as Biology, Chemistry, Humanities, Engineering, Computer Science, Medical Sciences, Management, Mathematical Sciences, and Languages. We sent copies of the questionnaires to all Yemeni students in the context of the study (112 students). The response rate was high (above 80%) because we got 92 completed questionnaires which were all valid. The questionnaire that was employed to collect data was based on Ward and Kennedy (1999) who developed Sociocultural Adjustment Scale (SCAS) for measuring and examining sociocultural adjustment of international students. This scale includes a number of skills that are necessary in managing everyday situations experienced when living in a new cultural environment (e.g., dealing with people in authority). Ward and Kennedy (1999) reported that the SCAS alphas range from 0.75 to 0.91. The data obtained from the completed questionnaires were analysed using SPSS version 22. We used SPSS to compile, tabulate, and analyse the data. Descriptive statistics offered information that helped us explain survey respondents' responses and to determine patterns and trends in the data (Creswell, 2005).

Results

In this section, the results related to the nine items on cognitive adjustment of international students are reported in Tables 1 and 2. Table 1 displays the frequencies and percentages of the respondents' responses to the nine items. On the other hand, Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for the nine items.

As shown in Table 1, 42 respondents (45.65%) showed that using transport system was not difficult for them, 24 (26.09%) perceived it as slight difficulty, and only 15 (16.3%) regarded it as a moderate difficulty. With reference to going shopping, 58 respondents (63.04%) agreed that this aspect of cognitive adjustment was not difficult for them. However, only 23 respondents (25%) indicated that going shopping was of a slight difficulty. Regarding following rules and regulations, almost half of the respondents (44.57%) indicated that this aspect of cognitive adjustment was of a slight difficulty, 20 respondents (21.74%) found it a moderate difficulty, and 19 respondents (20.65%) chose the option 'no difficulty'. With reference to dealing with people in authority which was the focus of item 4, 15 respondents (16.3%) indicated that dealing with people in authority in Malaysia was an extreme difficulty and 35 respondents (38.04%) considered it a great difficulty. About finding their own way around in Malaysia, 19 respondents chose the option 'no difficulty', 40 of the respondents (43.48%) showed that this aspect was a slight difficulty, 14 respondents (15.22%) considered it a moderate difficulty, and 17 (18.48%) chose the option 'great difficulty'. With reference to item 6 that focused on understanding the accent of people in Malaysia, 16 respondents (17.39%) chose the option 'no difficulty' and 36 respondents (39.13%) felt that it was a slight difficulty for them to understand the accent of the English language spoken by the locals in Malaysia. However, 14 respondents (15.22%) considered understanding the accent of the local as a moderate difficulty and 19 (20.65%) considered it a great difficulty. Regarding dealing with people of higher status, 27 respondents (29.35%) felt that this aspect of adjustment as extreme difficulty, 31 respondents showed that it was a great difficulty, 15 respondents (16.3%) marked it a moderate difficulty, and 15 respondents (16.3%) perceived it a slight difficulty. Understanding what was required of international students at their university was a slight difficulty for about half of the respondents (42.39%). In addition, 19 respondents (20.65%) chose the option 'moderate difficulty' and 15 respondents (16.3%) chose the option 'no difficulty' to show their response to the aspect of understanding what was required of international students at their university. Regarding the last item that focused on dealing with foreign staff at the university, 23 respondents (25%) considered it of no difficulty, 36 respondents (39.13%) showed that this aspect of cognitive difficulty was a slight difficulty, and 22 respondents (22.91%) chose 'moderate difficulty' to show their response to this item.

The means and standard deviations of all responses on the nine items of cognitive adjustment are provided in descending order in Table 2. As shown in Table 2, the major aspects of cognitive adjustment for Yemeni international postgraduate students in the context of the study were

'dealing with people of higher status', 'dealing with people in authority', and 'understanding the local accent/language'. While the mean score of the item 'dealing with people of higher status' is 3.68, the mean of 'dealing with people in authority' is 3.51. The mean of the item 'understanding the local accent/language' is 2.62.

As shown in Table 2 below, five aspects of cognitive difficulty are considered to be of moderate difficulty for Yemeni postgraduate students. These five aspects included (1) understanding the local accent (mean 2.62), (2) understanding what is required at the university (mean 2.54), (3) finding ways around (mean 2.38), (4) following rules and regulations (mean 2.33), and (5) dealing with foreign staff at the university (mean 2.26). Finally, as shown in Table 2, the last items were perceived to be of slight difficulty for Yemeni postgraduate students. These two items were using the transport system and going shopping. The mean score for 'using the transport system' is 1.98. With reference to 'going shopping', the mean score is 1.51.

Discussion and conclusions

This study was designed to examine how Yemeni postgraduate students in a Malaysian public university perceived their cognitive adjustment. This concern was answered through employing a questionnaire which was adapted from Ward and Kennedy's (1999) SCAS. The analysis of the data reveals that aspects of the cognitive adjustment faced by Yemeni postgraduate students in the context of the study include (1) dealing with people of higher status, (2) dealing with people in authority, and (3) understanding the local accent/language. These findings are similar to those reported in Thangiah (2010) on the sociocultural adjustment of international students in Asian universities. The students in this study perceived that dealing with people in authority and dealing with people of higher status are difficult for them. In fact, this can be attributed to the sociocultural background of the students who may believe that people in authority possess the right to make decisions about their academic progress and candidature in the host university. Additionally, as shown by the analysis of the data, the students perceived understanding the local accent/language as difficult because they had not have enough exposure to the use of English language before coming to Malaysia. This difficulty can be attributed to the educational background of the students who had their previous degrees in their country in Arabic language. Here, we would like to highlight that academic difficulties have their effect on the sociocultural adjustment difficulties. This can be dealt with in future research which should take into account the importance of intercultural competence of international students in host universities and its relation to academic adjustment. Unlike the findings of studies conducted by Myles and Cheng (2003) who found that international students have no sociocultural adjustment problems related to their sociocultural life in the host countries, Yemeni postgraduate students in the context of this study faced some adjustment difficulties. These cognitive adjustment difficulties examined in this study can be attributed to the cultural and social differences between international students' culture and the culture of the host country, Malaysia. Similar to the findings of studies conducted by Novera (2004), Li and Gasser (2005), and Brown and Holloway (2008), our study

has revealed that Yemeni postgraduate students in the context of this study face sociocultural adjustment difficulties due to unfamiliarity with the host nation's cultural norms and cultural difficulties. This study has focused on only the cognitive adjustment of 92 international postgraduate Yemeni students in a Malaysian public university. Future studies can focus on all international students in some Malaysian public universities because focusing on all international students can bring findings to complement the current study. Another suggestion for future studies is to examine academic difficulties and sociocultural difficulties of international students across a number of Malaysian public universities. A third suggestion for further investigation is to examine international students' behavioural adjustment in Malaysia.

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