

# THE LIVED EXPERIENCES IN CULTURAL AND SOCIAL ADJUSTMENTS OF ASEAN POST-GRADUATE STUDENT IN A MALAYSIAN RESEARCH UNIVERSITY

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**ABSTRACT.** *The internationalization and globalization trend has caused exponential expansion of international students' enrolment in higher education in Malaysia in the last decades, hence the government established research universities in the country. Because of this, thousands of students from all parts of the globe, including those from the neighboring countries in Southeast Asia region have come to Malaysia for education. However, with this desire for world-class international education comes the socio-cultural challenges that the international students face. In this study, their experiences were examined in socio-cultural settings. Through qualitative interviews with six international students from different ASEAN countries who are currently pursuing their post graduate studies in a Malaysian research university, this study revealed that the students deal with cultural challenges such as language and food barrier, and social challenges such as accommodation and transportation. The participants described how they coped with the challenges, as well as recommendations how the university and the community can help international students cope with socio-cultural adjustments in their academic life in the different cultural and social setting within the ASEAN region.*

**Keywords:** ASEAN acculturation, international students, Malaysian research university, post graduate students, socio-cultural challenges

## INTRODUCTION

With the recent demand for internationalization and globalization, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), in accordance with the ASEAN Economic Community initiatives, has ensued free flow of goods, services, investment, capital and skilled labor [1]. The blueprint mandated the ASEAN Universities Network (AUN) to enhance cooperation among member universities and facilitate the mobility of both students and staff within the region. As such, internationalization is about adopting an international outlook and aspiring for global competitiveness [2]. In this way, students will be interacting with new culture and new living and learning environment. This will help develop among students the capability to deal with other cultures and give them a head start as they prepare for leadership in an integrated ASEAN region. In addition, internationalization also helps provide opportunities for higher education institutions to improve their faculty, student, and administrator profiles because of the possibility of recruiting from any part of the world [3]. Malaysia is among the countries that are rapidly gaining prestige as most preferred education destination. Its popularity steadily increased. In Asia, Malaysia ranked 1 according to QS Top Universities [4], accounting to four institutions in the top 200 Times Higher Education [5]. In the global scene, Malaysia was ranked 12 in the Top 20 countries for international students in 2014 [6]. This explains the phenomenon why the number of international students coming in to Malaysia has exponentially increased in the last decade. In 2005, the number of international students was 6,622 (2007) and it has mushroomed to 120,398 in 2015 [7]. The international students are very important to the higher education as well as to a country as it brings such great impact to the country's economy, prestige of the university, cross culture learning and teaching and talent pool of the host country, and it can also and enhance the mutual understanding and appreciation of the differences found around the world [8, 9]. Thus, encouraging the enrolment of international students is one of the most important goals of any country's higher education.

## Socio-Cultural Challenges of International Students

While the country as a whole, and the university in particular enjoys benefits brought about by international students, the international students have their share of overwhelming social and cultural challenges outside their

home countries. For them, stress is dreadful because they experience various social and cultural shock, even homesickness in their new living and learning environment. A student may encounter a number of difficulties of the transitional period from everyday situations in daily life to social and cultural adaptation [10]. Among these socio-cultural challenges are pertaining to or related to food, language and communication differences, living in an unfamiliar environment, transportation, academic challenges, racial and cultural discrimination, financial concerns and health insurances [9, 11, 12]. It is very interesting to note that in several studies, it is demonstrated that the difference in the greater the culture of the host society differs from that of the sojourners' home culture, the slower sojourners will adapt, and more effort is expected to be devoted to adjusting to the new environment [13-15].

## Objective of the Study

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of international students coming from ASEAN countries in a specific context of a Malaysian research university to understand the social and cultural challenges that they face in their journey to their graduate studies. Specifically, the researchers intended to explore the following questions: (1) what are the social and cultural challenges that international students from ASEAN countries have experienced in a research university in Malaysia? (2) How difficult or easy was the adaptation considering that these students come from neighboring countries, in fact with the region of ASEAN? And (3) What intrapersonal and interpersonal actions did they do overcome these difficulties?

## Significance of this Study

Understanding the experiences of international students is therefore significant as it helps for creating and implementing programs that can provide them with the support that they need. Moreover, insights gleaned from this study can also help prospective international students increase awareness as they prepare to journey their academic pursuit in a foreign land.

## METHODOLOGY

### Study Design

This study employed the phenomenological research design [16] derived by the aim of this study which to understand in depth the lived experiences of ASEAN international students in a research university in Malaysia, specifically to

describe the socio-cultural challenges they faced while in the university, and to comprehend their experiences.

#### **Participants of the Study**

In approaching this study, three international post-graduate students coming from ASEAN countries who studied in a research university in Malaysia were using purposive sampling [17]. A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria [18] guided the selection of the participants based on the following: must be a full-time post graduate student, must have been at least a semester in the university to have the full grasp of the socio-cultural experiences in a foreign country, and must be from ASEAN countries. For the purposes of their privacy the actual names of the participants were replaced with pseudo names Grace, Mary and Esther and the same identification was used in the coding process of the data. English is their secondary language.

#### **Data Accumulation**

The researcher met all three respondents personally and thus developed congenial rapport with them. After some time of continual messaging, asked their consent to be participated in this study, which then they agreed. Throughout the study, the researcher maintained close communication with the participants. Thus, the established warm relations allowed the researcher and the participants to share living experiences in Malaysia specifically in the research university where the research setting was conducted.

Most of the data collection happened through emails, text messaging and calls through WhatsApp. The personal interviews were done through WhatsApp video calls, thus enabling both the researcher and the research participants to talk freely. Probing questions were made to further ask details on the respondents' answers. The relevance of this approach is to understand the respondent's point of experiences, perceptions and feelings, rather than generalize about their behavior [19]. To triangulate information, the researcher met each participant at different periods for further discussion and observation. The exchange of emails, messages and voice recording regarding the interview lasted for two and a half months starting from mid-February to early May of 2017. The interview questions were related to the socio-cultural challenges that the international students experienced when they came to study in Malaysia, and validated by three experts. Each participant answered the same set of questions. The language used in the interview was English.

#### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis was conducted using the conventional content analysis [20]. The interviews were transcribed and coded, facilitated by using Nvivo10 software. Initially 25 separate codes were generated but these were later condensed into eight categories, all of which fitted under the two themes which are: socio-cultural challenges and the adjustments to address the challenges. review. The categories are discussed within each theme followed by a presentation of potential strategies used and recommended by the participants. Themes that are not directly connected to the research questions were not included in the data analysis.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

The results revealed that the participants faced socio-cultural challenges during their early stay in Malaysia. However, it is important to state at the outset that the three participants have become fully adapted with the new environment considering that they are yet in the second

semester of their studies in the university. There was a clear process of adjustment for all the participants.

#### **Social-Cultural Challenges**

The narratives of the participants showed that the challenges they have had on the accommodation and transportation aspects are related to the finances that comes with it.

#### **Social Challenges**

The adjustment in accommodation is basically attributed to the high cost of house rentals plus the cost of utilities such as internet, water and electricity bills. The living condition in the house or apartment they are renting, however, are very favorable. To illustrate, Mary is renting a house because the campus where she is doing her research does not have hostel. She said that "*accommodation in satellite campus it is quite different from the main campus.*" In the satellite campus, she had to rent a house, and pay extra for the internet, electricity and water bills. With Grace's and Esther's situation, however, they were not able to book for the university hostel prior to registration. This is due to policy of the hostel management which does not accept hostel applicants who are not registered students yet. Since, students need a place to stay as soon as they come to Malaysia, they opted for renting apartment outside the campus. Grace narrated that the accommodation in the apartment is very okay. However, it was very expensive. Just like Mary, she has to pay for the internet, water and electricity bills aside from the house rental."

The challenges that the participants face in transportation is attributed to the distance and location of their accommodation from the university campus. According to Mary, she faced the most challenge in this aspect because it is very difficult to contact Uber or Grab in the satellite campus location. Her main transportation during daytime from her apartment to university laboratory is "*bicycling every day, six or ten times sometimes in a day.*" At times when she needs to go to the laboratory at night or go to the main campus, her biggest concern is the cost of taxi fare which is more expensive.

Just like Mary, Grace shared that her biggest challenge in transportation is the financial aspect. Uber or Grab are very expensive. Buses would have been a better option but there is no bus going to the apartment where she stayed. However, transportation in general, "*is not much of a problem because they are always available. Just a click on my mobile app and they come on your door steps.*" Fortunately, transportation for Esther "*is not much of an issue.*" Although the apartment she rented is farther, there is a bus connecting from that place to the main campus. Therefore, she takes bus every day. She said that the bus "*is cheaper and it is comfortable.*"

#### **Cultural challenges**

The cultural challenges that the participants faced are related to language, food and school bureaucracy. The language difficulties are attributed to different accents, rate of speech, and pronunciation. The challenges in terms of food were attributed to the difference of the food available within the rented house/apartments. The participants said they want to cook their own food, first to save on expenses and second to suit their taste buds.

Regarding the language adjustment, they said that Malaysian English is a totally new accent to them and it took them a while to adjust to it. Mary said that, "*the communication adjustment was a little bit hard to adjust.*" In addition, according to Grace, "*signages around the campus and in the community are written in Malay language.*" Esther is the luckiest of all because she came

from a country which has similar language with Bahasa Malaysia. She *“can communicate with the man in the shops and food stores and even in offices around the campus.”*

Just like in communication adjustments, Mary and Grace have difficulty adjusting to Malaysian foods as the foods served on cafeterias are quite different from their country. Being new in the community, they don't know where to buy food ingredients if ever they wish to cook, or that they have not yet explored where to buy ready-to-eat foods that suits their taste buds. Moreover, the most convenient cafeteria in the campus offers Indian food which, according to Grace *“is difficult because of curry flavor.”* In fact, she *“lost four kilos of weight in the first month of her stay in the community.”* For Esther, however, it was not problem because according to her, *“food in Penang is known as of the best, and I have no complain about that. I love the food in Penang better.”*

The bureaucracy system in the campus disturbs Esther. She said it is *“it is very ridiculous!”* She had observed that *“people work to please the boss and not to serve the people sincerely.”* She also added that discrimination is very open. She described her experience when she dealt with housing office in the university. The officer told her to wait for the room confirmation. However, as she left the room, a Malaysian student asked the same thing and she got confirmation instantly.

#### **Addressing the Challenges**

Theory states that the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills of a person, when utilized, will allow him to adjust in a new living environment. This is because the environment plays in the development of social cognition to a person. To this end, it was gleaned from the participants how they themselves exerted effort and how their relationship with others helped them adjust to the new environment.

#### **Reflecting on Intrapersonal skills**

The participants shared that being a student in a foreign land, they need to strengthen their personality first to be able to adjust. Mary narrated that she observes the characters of Malaysian, Chinese and Indian people. Her observations helped her communicate with other people with extra care. Mary and Grace shared the same thoughts that a foreigner student must exert effort to make the first action to reach out with locals. Mary said that during her classes, she introduced herself first and befriended others. Grace added to this by saying that *“the international student must first exert effort in making friends with classmates and lecturers to gain their trust and confidence.”* Grace added that *“an international student in Malaysia must possess a large amount of patience and motivation to finish. That will help much in overcoming difficulties one might encounter along the way.”* Esther, on the other hand, revealed that her personal connection with friends back home kept her strong and sane.

#### **Exercising Interpersonal Skills**

Another factor that helped the international students adjusted to the new environment is their skills of dealing with other people. They are claimed that their positive relationship with friends, families and lecturers have greatly helped them. Mary said that her *“classmates are all very congenial, helpful, and approachable.”* Grace shared that her *“classmates and lecturers are all very congenial.”* She further narrated that her classmates and lecturers accepted her, being the lone Christian, in the class without discrimination. Their laughter, their smiles, their helping hands are all very helpful in her adjustment with the new environment. Esther also said that she gained friends and they were a big help in her adjustment.

Families also play a very significant support in the respondents' adjustments. Mary described that being away from the family for the first time is depressing, hence, she makes constant connection with them through messenger which helped her in many ways. Grace also narrated that with a fast internet connection in the house and at school, she keeps *“connected with family back home easily through video calling.”*

#### **Enjoying Friendly School Culture**

The friendly school culture had also greatly helped the participants. Mary and Grace shared that the small class sizes enabled them to mingle with classmates. In Mary's class are only seven students, thus, it is easy to build friendship. Senior students are also willing to help the junior ones. Grace also shared the same experience stating that her classmates and lecturers helped much because they easily accepted her in the class without discrimination. Esther, who is in full-time research mode described that the PhD program provided a win-win solution for her. This gives her the opportunity to go home anytime and do her research there. She only comes to Malaysia to meet and discuss with her supervisor, or if there are seminars that that postgraduate institute gives which are related to her studies.

#### **Abiding to Faith in God**

One very significant theme that was gleaned from the data analysis, although only one of the three made mentioned about it, is the faith in the Almighty One. Grace shared, *“I see to it that I have connection with the Almighty. I do my daily prayers and I go to church regularly. I believe these things helped me a lot in my journey here in the university.”*

#### **SUMMARY AND DISCUSION**

The data in this study presented the socio-cultural challenges and coping strategies associated with international students from ASEAN countries studying in a research university in Malaysia.

It can be gleaned from this study that, although the participants come from the southeast Asian region, they still face challenges such as food, language, bureaucracy and discrimination. Although the accommodation and transportation challenges were identified, but they were basically due to the financial aspect that comes with it.

It can also be deduced from their responses that congenial and helpful friends and classmates; approachable, helpful and friendly lecturers; a positive school system; a strong emotional and moral support from families back home are helpful in the adjustment experiences of the participants. Previous studies showed that family and friends are well placed to provide support and to facilitate help seeking for depression [21]. Another study also showed that family members are the major source of physical and emotional support for older adults, yet researchers suggest that friendships have a stronger bearing on subjective well-being [22]. These studies strengthen the interpersonal relationships as a strong weapon for helping cope in a new environment.

#### **CONCLUSION**

While the international students in previous study have encountered different isolation in class and their social life [23], the participants in this study claimed that they felt they belong in the circle of classmates because of their willingness to exert effort in reaching out for others, this, then, satisfies Abraham Maslow's sense of belongingness in his hierarchy of needs theory[24].

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of this study, the following points are highly recommended. Being accommodation and transportation are among the challenges faced by international students by virtue of the distance of the house to the campus, the participants suggest that hostels among universities be strongly considered especially in remote campuses. Secondly, language is the most difficult adjustment experienced by the international students. They therefore suggest that signages inside the campus be written in both Malay and English languages for better facilitations especially for new students. Thirdly, the exponential growth of international students coming in Malaysia is a huge phenomenon. It is highly recommended that for university administrators strengthen policies so as to provide equal treatment to students, both local and foreigner to avoid discrimination. This discrimination issue can topple down an international student if not handled properly. Fourthly, the findings of this study focused on a particular group of international students at a specific institution, it is recommended that a similar study may also be conducted to a more diversified number of respondents from the region. Finally, themes that emerged from this study may be used for quantitative studies in similar or different context.

## LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Due to constraints of time as this study was conducted only within two and a half months period, and the difficulty of finding participants within the given criteria, one emerging theme which was about the faith on Divine Intervention was not further investigated with other respondents. Furthermore, this study intended to investigate only international students from the ASEAN countries to determine how they were able to cope with socio-cultural challenges given that Southeast Asian region have basically similar cultures. As this study is qualitative in nature, its findings cannot be generalized to a larger population.

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