

PREPARING COUNSELLORS FOR MALAYSIAN STUDENTS' ACCULTURATION

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ABSTRACT: Australia has been one of the foreign countries with most Malaysian students since 2002. The involved students are required to undergo an acculturation process that is known to have full of challenges while living in Australia. Counselling services play a social role that provides support for them to survive to live abroad. This study was preliminarily aimed to explore the challenges of living in Australia and the extent to which counselling is necessary for the students to endure acculturation challenges faced in the country. The study employed a qualitative method using a phenomenological approach. Researchers conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample who was a Malaysian student that fulfils the criteria of having experience studying in an Australian university for a minimum duration of two years. The data from the interview was analysed using thematic analysis comprising open coding, axial coding, matrix coding, and theme. Findings highlighted five themes to answer two research questions in this study. Two themes addressed the challenges faced by Malaysian students which are the differences in the academic system and differences in climate. Three other themes addressed the need for student counselling services which are an effective medium of communication, personal development and academic advisor. This study provided a clear picture of overall challenges while living in Australia as a student and the importance students may benefit from counsellor's presence. Sponsorship organisations such as Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA) and Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam Malaysia (JPA) may improve the content of abroad study programmes. Future researchers may consider conducting further studies in different and broader contexts.

KEYWORDS: acculturation; cross-culture; support system; counselling; survival

I. INTRODUCTION

A report from National Education Statistics Malaysia has released statistics on the number of Malaysian students studying abroad. The latest record in 2018 showed that 78,459 students have opted to further their studies abroad. Seventy-six per cent of the students are self-sponsored while the rest are sponsored (Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi, 2018). Among the organisations offering sponsorship of education abroad include the *Jabatan Perkhidmatan Awam Malaysia* (JPA), the *Majlis Amanah Rakyat* (MARA), *Petronas*, *Bank Negara Malaysia*, *Tenaga Nasional Berhad* and others. In general, these students have been counted in among the international students' cohort which is often associated with the process of acculturation and cross-cultural issues.

For Malaysian students who are studying abroad, self-adjusting to the host culture is necessary to help them survive the new environment. According to Berry (1997) and Lin and Betz (2009), social support plays a positive role in cross-cultural acculturation. In the context of education, a counsellor is a professional who is the closest to the students. Counselling services act as social support for students who are studying abroad when it comes to handling cross-cultural and daily life issues.

Past researchers showed that there are many challenges faced by Malaysian students during acculturation process (Abdul Latiff Ahmad, Nur Zalila Md Zamri, Ali Salman, Emma Mirza Wati Mohamed & Hasrul Hashim, 2014; Aarreniemi-Jokipielto & Back, 2014; Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016; Lyken-Segosebe, 2017; Sabariah & Siti Khadijah, 2017). Acculturation process is the product of intercultural self-adjustment when arriving at a new place (Berry, 1980). It is classified mainly into two (2) domains which are psychological acculturation and sociocultural acculturation. Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) defined psychological and sociocultural acculturation as the emotional and behavioural responses consecutively in order to counter the differences between origin culture and the new dominant culture. Berry (2006) also added to the psychological acculturation as the psychological well-being of an individual upon perceiving the new environment of culture. Masgoret and Ward (2006) drew a definition upon sociocultural acculturation as the survival of social interactions with the people of the dominant culture.

In 1955, Lysgaard introduced the U-Curve Model to explain different phases of adjustment when a student was undergoing the acculturation process. The model consists of four (4) phases focused on experiences of students acculturating from an individualistic cultural background in the collectivistic cultural background. The first phase is called the honeymoon phase. Students delightfully explore the place upon the first arrival. The second phase is named culture shock phase. Students began to realise the difficulties of adjusting between cultures. The

third phase is the adjustment phase. Students started to recognise suitable strategies to encounter acculturation difficulties. The last phase is named mastery. In this phase, students managed to confront problems related to acculturation and maintained good psychological health. This paper will focus on exploring challenges in the culture shock phase and adjustment phase among Malaysian students. Researchers also aim to build a deeper understanding of the need for counsellors to help students to acculturate in the country they study in.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Malaysian students who pursue their studies abroad face various pressures. The cross-cultural acculturation process they go through contributes to the challenges they have to face in order to survive. Abdul Latiff Ahmad, Nur Zalila Md Zamri, Ali Salman, Emma Mirza Wati Mohamed and Hasrul Hashim (2014) have investigated the problems encountered by Malaysian students during the cross-cultural acculturation process in Australia and in the United Kingdom. Meanwhile, Sabariah Mohamed Salleh and Siti Khadijah Hussin (2017) investigated stressful issues based on the 'Culture Shock' phase in the U-Curve model among Malaysian students. The issues and challenges found from the above studies are: (i) negative perceptions, (ii) discrimination, (iii) food, (iv) education system, (v) language barriers, (vi) homesickness, (vii) silence, (viii) weather, and (ix) currency. Stress caused by those challenges affects students' emotional and mental health. Academic achievement can also be affected if appropriate action is not taken to solve the challenges. Zhou and Bankston (1994) have shown that a lack of social support and sense of belonging in a new environment can lead to poor academic achievement and minimize the acculturation skills among students. In a Muslim country like Jordan, students felt worrisome for not being able to conform to the norms and values of the dominant culture (Alazzi & Al-Jarrah, 2016). Meanwhile, in the non-muslim countries, Malaysian students reported being discriminated against and felt offended due to religious identity rejection by the local community (Sabariah Mohamed Salleh & Siti Khadijah Hussin, 2017).

In the aspect of support, past researchers agreed that Asian students who study abroad may have the sense of belonging only if they feel supported enough in the host country (Wang, Wei & Chen, 2015; Wei, Wang, Heppner & Du, 2012). Han and Pong (2015) studied the extent to which students would like to receive professional service in mental health. They found that 65.2 per cent of students expressed willingness to receive such services and that existing stigma towards the profession has slightly affected the findings of the study. However, Ra and Trusty (2017) mentioned that if students receive social support, be it from a professional or anyone else, they will be able to overcome stress experienced during the cross-cultural acculturation process. To conclude, counselling as social support is undeniably crucial to the students' survival in academic, emotional, and mental while living abroad.

In 2018, a team of researchers Li, Wang, Liu, Xu and Cui studied the effects of acculturation experiences in America on academic performance among thirteen students coming from East Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia and Taiwan. Researchers found the main problem faced was the stigma attached to lacking English fluency. Nearly all of them experienced stressful academic when they had to avoid interactions with locals because they been looked down due to the stigma and the locals hardly understand their English slang.

Kambouropoulos (2015) conducted a survey on the rate of counselling services used in Australia for critical social, academic, psychological and physical issues. Students involved were vary in nationalities such as Malaysian, Indonesian, Singaporean and Indian. A total of 90 students completed the survey. The survey revealed three main findings about the students which are i) the persons they would likely rely on for emotional support, ii) the persons they would mostly refer to during acculturation in Australia, and iii) the obstacles that stop them from seeing a counsellor. The main reason the students refused to seek help from a counsellor when having critical problems was because of breaching confidentiality to parents. They assumed counsellor would break into their privacy life. Most of them tend to look down on themselves if they see a counsellor for help. In addition, they preferably relied on friends for emotional support because of the closeness among them compared to counsellors. In other words, the professional responsibility of becoming a role of social support has been replaced by close friends rather than a counsellor.

III. METHODOLOGY**RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study is a preliminary qualitative study that applies a phenomenological approach. The qualitative research design was selected to improve the understanding of a phenomenon through human experience (Myers, 2000). Phenomenological design is suitable for this study because it fulfils the need of the researcher to explore the meaning of life experiences described by the participant (Blomberg & Volpe, 2008; Creswell, 2007). In the context of this study, the researcher delved into the experience from the perspective of students who have furthered their tertiary education in Australia.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUE

Phenomenological approaches use sampling that engages those related to the issues, actions, and activities studied (Frost, 2011). The sampling technique used in this study is the purposive sampling technique. As stated by Merriam (2009), purposive sampling is based on the assumption that researchers want to explore, determine and gain a clearer perception from the respondent. Therefore, the sample should be selected among the most studied. This technique can help researchers obtain rich and thick data (Carey, 2012). Selected participant must meet criteria as this will lead to a data collection process that is richer and more robust (Carey, 2012). The criteria were the participant must have experienced in studying abroad for a two years minimum duration of the study. As this study is preliminary in nature, only one participant was involved.

DATA COLLECTION

After obtaining consent from the participant, the data collection process began. This study uses in-depth semi-structured interviews as a data collection method. The interviews were based on a protocol interview. It revolved around the two (2) research objectives which are i) the exploration of challenges faced during the study abroad and ii) the needs for counselling services to resolve challenges raised. The interview process required them to rethink their past experiences including their feelings, behaviors and reactions to what they went through as a foreign students. As this process may have made the participants more sentimental, the researchers reminded them again of the concept of confidentiality in each interview. Each shared experience is the subject of a research study and will not be disclosed except with permission (DharatunNissa, 2017). Researchers conducted three interview sessions with participant to get sufficient information. An audio recorder was used to collect audio data throughout both interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis process is a very important process because all data obtained through the interviews need to be analysed in stages (Blomberg & Volpe, 2008). The interview recordings were transcribed using the OTranscribe website. The transcription process takes a long time because researchers must listen to the recordings repeatedly while reviewing the transcripts to avoid errors in the verbatim transcription. The verbatim transcription was then analysed manually to extract themes which answer the research questions. This manual analysis consists of four coding stages similar to the Atlas.Ti 8 software, namely open coding, axial coding, matrix coding and thematic coding.

Open coding requires the researcher to encode each piece of information or item as new codes or in vivo codes that contribute to the researchers' knowledge about the research participant. Axial coding requires a meticulous code searching process for codes which share similar topics, categories or reflections. Matrix coding, on the other hand, requires reviewing the research questions and classifying the code categories accordingly. Code categories which are not related to the concept of the study need to be maintained because these codes could emerge as new data in the study (Blomberg & Volpe, 2008). These categories are further narrowed in scope to form the main themes in the findings. Some of the themes may share similarities with previous literature or emerge as new themes (Merriam, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The main issues in qualitative research are reliability and validity (Morrow, 2005). To address this issue and to ensure that the theme meets the research objectives, the researcher conducted (i) member checking with the research participant to reconfirm information obtained and (ii) peer review with a research supervisor and fellow researchers for guidance and improvement.

IV. RESULTS

PARTICIPANT’S PROFILE

The participant is a 24 year-old male. He finished his undergraduate study in New South Wales, Australia for three-and-a-half year. Due to his outstanding academic achievement during his preparation year, he received a scholarship offer from a government agency named Majlis Amanah Rakyat (MARA). He was taking major in Electrical Engineering during his undergraduate study in Australia. Participant was an excellent student back in Malaysia. He was awarded for many achievements in his studies and co-curricular activities since his high school. He never had problems with living independently in Australia because he attended boarding school for eight (8) years.

V. RESEARCH FINDINGS

Five main themes were identified in the findings after the data analysis process: The themes are explained according to the following research questions;

1. What are the issues and challenges faced during your studies in Australia?
2. How can counselling services help Malaysian students to acculturate when they are faced with cross-cultural issues in the abroad?

A summary of the research findings is shown in Table 1.

Acculturation issues and challenges of Malaysian students in Australia	
Theme	Sub-themes
Differences in academic systems	Malaysian vs Australian university systems
Differences in climate	Transition from winter to summer
Counselling needs of Malaysian students during acculturation	
Themes	Sub-themes
Effective medium of communication	Lack of expertise and professional help Limited appointments with campus counsellors High cost of external counsellors
Personal development	Inner motivation
Academic advisor	No mediator with whom the student can discuss with

Table 1. Themes and sub-themes of research questions (1) and (2)

ACCULTURATION ISSUES AND CHALLENGES OF MALAYSIAN STUDENTS IN AUSTRALIA

As a student who went abroad to study, the participant encountered several issues and challenges throughout his studies in Australia. He viewed the challenges as a bittersweet memory that enriched his living. He took the challenges faced as a platform for himself to reflect on the quality of life in Australia. He appreciated the ups and downs as lessons for now and in the future. The two themes identified are as follows:

- a) Different academic systems
- b) Different climate

A) DIFFERENT ACADEMIC SYSTEMS

Participant was referring to the dissimilarities between the academic system in Malaysia and in Australia. He defined the gap as a huge gap on lecturers’ teaching method between the two countries. During his studies in Malaysia, lecturers gave many step-by-step instructions on how to solve a problem, along with explanation. The students were spoon-fed by the lecturers. However in Australia, the situation was very different. The lecturers or teaching assistants tended to question each of his solving techniques and asked him to explain the answers given.

“..... In Malaysia tutorials are usually taught by the lecturer step by step. Compared to tutorials abroad, lecturers only provide answers. That is why teaching assistants do not show how answers are obtained step by step during tutorials. He will only say okay what should you do if you have a problem like this? Okay we do this. Why should you do this? Why should you do it like this? Their approach is sometimes difficult for Malaysians because we have this mindset where there is a problem or which formula to use okay gets the answer directly.”

(PK1/T2/B226)

In addition, he also had problems adjusting to the university's student portal. This is because while he was studying in Malaysia, he and the rest of the students were always keep updated by the lecturer. Therefore, they rarely accessed the university's student portal. The situation was very different during his studies in Australia. The use of student portals among the campus community is highly common. Checking the student portal has become a must-to-do routine for every student. Participant had an unfortunate experience for his first quizzes. He rarely checked the student portal, thus he nearly missed the quizzes.

“I needed to adjust for the first time I almost missed the quizzes because all quizzes, exams and tutorials are stated in the course outline. That's how it is studying abroad. When the new semester begins we have to read the whole course outline for all subjects. But in Malaysia the lecturer would inform okay next week there's a quiz. Okay in two weeks there's a quiz. Okay what will appear in a quiz.. all of this.. Okay examples of quiz questions. This takes place in Malaysia but no one tells you anything when you study abroad, everything is written. That's why as Malaysians we are used to being spoon fed by lecturers. So when we study abroad we are quite surprised.”

(PK1/T2/B238)

B) DIFFERENCES IN CLIMATE

Participant defined the challenges in the differences in climate as the change from winter to summer. This experienced was very tough for participant because he has sensitive skin. Every time the season changes, it impacted him adversely. His skin would crack easily when too much exposed to high radiation sunlight. He also mentioned about trying different skin care products just to treat his damaged skin. As his skin was sensitive, only a few products ever work well for him. Participant shared his concern about money spending on skin products because most of the high quality products were highly expensive.

“in terms of weather it's problematic because my skin is very sensitive. But after I adapted to the weather it was ok. For example, during the change in climate from winter to summer, my skin would crack.”

(PK1/T1/B59)

THE NEEDS OF COUNSELLING SERVICES FOR MALAYSIAN STUDENTS TO FACE ACCULTURATION CHALLENGES AND CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES ABROAD

As a student who has been through the experience of moving to a new country, the research participant stated that counselling services are crucial, especially for Malaysian students in Australia. Based on his experience, he highly suggests students to reach out for counsellor's help. With such assistance from a professional, the acculturation process may become less stressful. There were three (3) reasons highlighted by participant upon the need of counsellors for students in Australia. The three themes identified are as follows:

- a) Effective medium of communication
- b) Personal development
- c) Academic advisor

A) EFFECTIVE MEDIUM OF COMMUNICATION

Effective communication can be defined as the fluent of message delivery from a student to an officer. Participant elaborated on the effectiveness of a communication can be measured by how much attention he felt when raising his opinion. While his living in Australia, participant felt needed someone professional to express his feelings and to let go all of his worrisome in a proper way. He pointed out the fact that if a counsellor was available during his studies in Australia, he would take the opportunity to see the counsellor before he decided to change university. He also believed that counsellors are highly capable to assist him in handling problems faced during the acculturation process.

“.....I prefer to talk about an issue with a person with expertise than to just chat with someone without any expertise who can only give casual advice.”

(PK1/T1/B160)

Secondly, the participant mentioned about high cost charged to see private counsellor. He pointed out the need for counsellors for Malaysian students in Australia because the cost per session with private counsellors is unbearable for Malaysian students. In-campus counselling services were offered but there are limited quota sessions. This is because an insurance company responsible for international students only cover costs for six (6) times counselling appointments. If the students desire to continue further counselling sessions, they have to bear the consultation costs which are quite high for a student with no fixed income.

“Nowadays I think it is a necessity because when I was previously in Australia no counsellors were available from MARA, my sponsor. So there were only counsellors provided by the university. After a few sessions we have to pay and the cost is not cheap.”

(PK1/T1/B122)

B) PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT

According to the participant, personal development defined by the emotional state and decision making skills. He mentioned his life would be better if he ever had the opportunity to seek professional help. Participant highlighted the most tearful event for him in Australia was when he failed three (3) out of four (4) subjects he took in the third semester. He had the worst mental breakdown because he never ever experienced failures in academic. That was his first encounter and he failed to manage his emotional state. He went to see Malaysian authorities at the embassy straightaway to request for changing university. His upset was doubled when his request was rejected. Participant reported losing self-confident and became deeply demotivated to carry his life forward. Due to his academic failures experience, participant showed how important a counsellor would be for him to regain his inner motivation.

“When I was in my second year university was a bad experience for me and it had an impact on my life. Honestly, I lost my confidence because I’ve never had that kind of experience. It had a huge impact on my life. For instance, I didn’t have time for a holiday, including weekends that I sacrificed to stay at home, finish up my homework and study.”

(PK1/T1/B36)

Participant also portrayed his concern on having a counsellor in Australia in terms of language of communication. He pointed out the importance of sharing his problems with someone who might speak similar native language with him. Participant had an experience seeing in-campus counsellor. The counselling session turned out unpleasantly to him. He was unable to feel his genuine feelings while sharing his personal problems in English. He had to pick suitable words to convey stories without misunderstanding. He spent time on restructuring sentences because some problems were better delivered in Malay language. Therefore, participant suggested by having a Malaysian counsellor, he may express himself undoubtedly.

“Err this feeling is because when we meet someone who is not from the same country. So it’s like when we talk I’m not sure if they understand what I am trying to convey. When it’s like that I feel like oh it’s ok this will be my last time. I don’t want to come again. It becomes a different issue.”

(PK1/T2/B271)

C) ACADEMIC ADVISOR

The academic advisor refers to the need for a counsellor to play the role of an academic advisor. In regards to his academic failures, participant decided to discuss about the matter with Malaysian authorities at the embassy. He initially wanted for suggestion on what he should do next. However, due to his overwhelming disappointment, he changed his intention from wanting a suggestion to wanting a decision approval. Participant admitted he rushed into decision making and regretted about it. He opined that if he was able to first voice his concerns through a counsellor, the counsellor could have acted as his advisor before he approached the authorities.

“.....when I intended to extend another semester I wanted to meet a counsellor and ask for his or her opinion on transferring to another university which was easier than the current one. Due to several issues MARA didn't allow me to be transferred to another university because it is a complicated matter. So if there was a counsellor who understood the issue better, maybe he or she would be able to better convey that opinion to the higher ups in MARA compared to the student himself.”

(PK1/T1/B141)

VI. DISCUSSION

In the process of understanding the experiences of enduring issues and challenges among Malaysian students in Australia, it can be viewed from internal and external perspectives. As mentioned in past research, either one or both can cause emotional disturbance. Hence, the presence of a right counsellor is believed to be a platform that offers emotional, mental and physical comfort every time students feel morally breakdown. These are in line with Ra and Trusty (2017) whose study found the similar impact of social support has in the reduction of acculturation stress among Chinese, South Korean, Taiwanese and Japanese students in the United States of America.

In the context of this study, counselling services in Australia which are delivered by Malaysian counsellors have potentials to meet the expected needs and requirements for Malaysian students. First, by overcoming the existing language barriers to allow Malaysian students feel comfortable to voice out their concerns. However, this finding is contrary to a suggestion by Ra and Trusty (2015) where international students should still seek social services despite differences in spoken language such as international student associations or local student organisations. The suggestion disregard the discomfort feelings felt by the students and insist them to keep on seeking professionals for social support. On the other hand, current researchers find that comfort ability is a necessary element in building good relationship and trust between counsellor and our students. Nonetheless, both recent and past researchers hold on to the same standpoint that every individual student need at least a single support to survive living in a new place.

From the perspective of counselling, the findings of this study provide clear insights for multicultural counsellors. They need to understand that acculturation problems that occur among Malaysian students abroad is a serious matter. Many students experience mental health problems because of pressure resulting from academic matters, culture, finance, peers and more. These problems can be confronted properly if students get proper guidance and advice. If counselling services are available to Malaysian students abroad, counsellors should reach out to students to better understand their situation and students will be guilty-free about sharing their problems.

This study focuses on Malaysian students in one of the countries with a big Malaysian community, namely Australia. Therefore, it is recommended that future research explores the need for counselling for Malaysian students pursuing their studies in countries with a smaller Malaysian community. This is because studies by Slaten, Elison, Lee, Yough and Scalise (2016) have shown that a lack of social support from individuals with similar cultural backgrounds is a reason why students find it difficult to acculturate in a new country.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provide important implications for students who desire to further their study abroad. Preparing themselves mentally, emotionally and physically is a must as well as preparing for good grades. Counsellors, department of student affairs and educators may gain insights for factors that cause students' pressure not only in overseas but also in the country. Cross-cultural stress may not be familiar among professionals at school or universities, but these issues do exist. Professionals should reach out to the related community by offering them knowledge and services the public should know. Furthermore, local universities may use findings from this study as a fundamental to organise programmes that prepare students mentally, emotionally and psychologically before flying overseas. The purpose is to acknowledge them about how challenging the new life can be and how important getting support from professionals such as counsellors can assist them in dealing with the challenges during the acculturation process. From the perspective of counselling, appointing more qualified counsellors who are competent in cultural diversity will increase students' confidence in seeking help from counsellors, especially when they face any problems during acculturation. Therefore, relevant institutions are encouraged to provide ongoing training and courses for existing counsellors so that the common goal of helping all cultures within the student community can be achieved.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study provides an overview on the need for counselling to help Malaysian students abroad in dealing with challenges and cross-cultural acculturation issues. The experiences gained by an individual from the acculturation process will influence his or her ability to interact according to local norms and values. A person who migrates to another country has to adapt to a new environment in order to lead a well-balanced life. This is because cross-cultural acculturation is a quality that is already present in every individual who travels abroad but it is difficult to apply in real life situations. The same applies to Malaysian students who are pursuing their studies abroad. Although they are ready to acculturate to the new culture and life in Australia, Malaysian students still require a support system. Therefore, counselling services are essential as a strong support system for this group of Malaysian students to move on with their lives.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was supported by the grant from the Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (GG-2019-023).

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