Adjustment in International Students in Malaysian Public University

Yusliza Mohd.Yusoff and Shankar Chelliah

Abstract—**Study on international students' adjustment while studying in a foreign environment is widely researched in the United States and Britain. A growing body of research has been carried out to study on its determinants. This paper intended to contribute to the Malaysian literature pertaining to this subject. Less attention is given on how the international students adjust successfully in Malaysian public university. This paper proposes seven antecedent variables in predicting the psychological and sociocultural adjustment among international students. Further, academic achievement is proposed as a result of successful adjustment to the psychological and sociocultural. Based on this relationship, several propositions are developed.**

Index Terms—**Malaysia, psychological adjustment, public university, sociocultural adjustment.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Currently Malaysian institutions of higher education are striving to attract international students from other countries. The number of international students studying in Malaysia has been increasing since 1996, due to various higher education reforms were introduced in order to facilitate the entry of international students into higher education institutions. Going by the latest statistics, there are more than 90,000 international students currently studying in the numerous institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. According to Immigration Department records, the number of foreigners holding student passes number 90,501 as of 31 December 2008. This is close to the target set by the Ministry of Higher Education, which is 100,000 by 2010. Out of the figures provided by the Immigration Department, Indonesia and China constitute the highest number of international students in this country. They number 14,359 and 11,628 respectively. There are also a big number of students from Nigeria (6,765), Iran (6,514), Bangladesh (3,820) and the Middle East countries (http://islamhadhari.net/?p=2543). According to Paige (1990), international students are defined as individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship in order to participate in international educational exchange as students. As the

number of international students entering Malaysian universities increase, the need to understand and to address their psychological and crosscultural adjustment to this country becomes more important.

Adjusting to a new culture can be a challenging and stressful experience. Rigorous academic demands along with the challenges to adjust to a new culture may put international students at a greater risk than students in general. Lin and Yi (1997) mentioned that international students face common as well as their own unique problems such as racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, dietary restrictions, financial stress, misunderstandings, and loneliness. Furthermore, coming from different cultures, international students cannot escape from cultural shock and are often with astounding difficulties (Pruitt 1978). According to Pedersen (1995), "culture shock is the process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment" (p. 1). International students differ greatly in adjusting to their new circumstances and studies. Some adjust easily while others find it very difficult. It becomes vital to understand the factors most involved in a successful adjustment. Therefore, the goals of this article are to identify major variables involved in the adjustment process for international students (undergraduate and graduate) and develop a general framework for them. Specifically, this article introduced the concept of psychological adjustment and sociocultural adjustment and used them to (a) determine relationships between demographic factors, social support, and personality variables with international students' adjustment; (b) examine the relationship between psychological and sociocultural adjustment with academic achievement; and (c) create a framework for the study of international students' adjustment.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

A. Psychological and Sociocultural Adjustment

Ward and Kennedy (1999) are among many writers to argue that there is limited consensus and clarity as to what adjustment means, as the construct has been described and measured in varying ways and from several perspectives. According to Ramsay et al. (1999), adjustment describes the fit between students and the academic environment. In this study, adjustment is divided into psychological (emotional, referring to well-being, anxiety depression, fatigue) and sociocultural (behavioural, referring to ability to fit in) domains (Brown and Holloway 2008). Psychological adjustment can be best understood in terms of a stress and

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coping framework, predicted and explained by personality and social support variables and life changes, whilst sociocultural adjustment is viewed from a social learning perspective, predicted by variables related to cognitive factors and social skills acquisitions (Ward and Kennedy 1999). Using the dimensions offers a simultaneously understanding of the unpredictability and variability of psychological adjustment (Searle and Ward 1990) and the reliability of the sociocultural approach to adaptation (Ward and Kennedy 1999).

B. Linking Demographic Factors and Adjustment

Sumer et al. (2008) suggested age variable contributed uniquely to the variance in anxiety. Older students were more likely to report higher levels of anxiety (Sumer et al. 2008). Sumer et al. (2008) further explained that older students may be more traditional, more resistance to change, and have more difficulties in accepting the host culture's norms and values and, therefore, experience higher levels of anxiety during their adjustment period. The younger the international students, the quicker and easier the adjustment process in the foreign country (Tomich et al. 2003).

Proposition 1: *Age will be negatively related with psychological and sociocultural adjustment.*

The potential for adjustment processes to be complicated among international students acculturating with spouses and family have also been noted in the literature (Oropeza et al. 1991). In Poyrazli and Kavanaugh's (2006) study, results showed that married international students reported experiencing a lower level of social adjustment strain than the single ones. Since these students are married, they do not feel the need to explore other possible relationships, and fulfil their social support needs at home through their spouse or family. Therefore, in the case of married international students, the marital relationship may be functioning as a buffer.

Proposition 2: *Married international students will be positively related with psychological and sociocultural adjustment.*

Fong and Peskin (1969) was the earliest study examined gender differences in adaptation. They suggested that female students experience more strain than their male counterparts. Other studies that examined international students showed that female students had higher emotional, physiological, and behavioural reactions to stressors (Misra et al. 2003) and also were more likely to feel homesick and lonely than were male students (Rajapaksa and Dundes 2002). Sumer et al. (2008) found no relation between gender and international students' depression and anxiety levels. Thus, there is a need for more careful investigation of gender differences when evaluating international student adjustment.

Proposition 3: *Gender will be negatively related with psychological and sociocultural adjustment.*

The longer individuals reside in the foreign country, the better the adjustment process to the new environment will be (Ward and Kennedy 1992; Wilton and Constantine 2003). For instance, Wilton and Constantine (2003) found that greater length of stay in the U.S. was associated with lower levels of psychological distress among Asian and Latin American international college students. In a more recent study on the relationship between adult attachment styles and psychological and sociocultural adjustment of Polish, Russian, and Hungarian immigrants to Dutch society by Polek et al. (2008), it is proven that length of residence appeared to be positively related to identification and contact with the host culture. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed.

Proposition 4: *Length of residence will be positively related with psychological and sociocultural adjustment.*

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C. Linking English Proficiency and Adjustment

English proficiency and adjustment appear to be positively related. For example, several researchers have investigated how students' language proficiency in English affect their adjustment (Poyrazli et al. 2002; Swami et al. 2009). Poyrazli et al. (2002) measured the general adjustment in their study involved the ability to negotiate issues related to education, cultural adjustment, and the establishment of social relationships with Americans. Success in these areas depended on the students' ability to communicate in English. Similarly, Swami et al. (2009) found that Malaysian students with higher English proficiency were better adapted in Britain.

Proposition 5: *English proficiency will be positively related with psychological and sociocultural adjustment.*

D. Linking Social Support and Adjustment

One factor that appears to improve adjustment is social support, which may provide international students with opportunities to develop an understanding of the new culture. Sumer et al. (2008) studied the predictors of depression and anxiety among international students and found that social support had a significant contribution to the model in predicting depression. In particular, students with lower levels of social support reported higher levels of depression. Besides depression, they also found that social support also contributed significantly to the variance in anxiety, particularly students with lower levels of social support were more likely to have higher levels of anxiety. Indeed, recent work has highlighted the importance of social support network use in mitigating the detrimental effects of the acculturation process on psychological well-being (Jasinskaja-Lahti et al. 2006).

Proposition 6: *Social support will be positively related with psychological and sociocultural adjustment.*

E. Linking Personality Variables and Adjustment

Besides background variables that have been discussed above, personality variables also play significant roles in adjustment. In fact, Wang (2008) highlighted that personality variables have been studied individually or in a small group in adjustment without having an overarching framework. Similarly, Polek et al. (2008) also mentioned that little attention has been given to personality factors in adjustment research. Personality differences in coping with change contribute to different adjustment experience among international students. Ward et al. (2004) discovered that

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neuroticism and extraversion were related to psychological and sociocultural adaptation. Agreeableness and conscientiousness were also linked to psychological well-being. For the purpose of this study, personality variables (Big Five Personality) will play significant role in psychological and sociocultural adjustment.

Proposition 7a: *Neuroticism, extraversion and openness will be negatively related with psychological and sociocultural adjustment.*

Proposition 7b: *Conscientiousness and agreeableness will be positively related with psychological and sociocultural adjustment.*

F. Linking Adjustment (Psychological and Sociocultural) and Academic Achievement

Swami et al (2009) suggested for future studies to incorporate measures of academic achievement or satisfaction in studies involving student sojourners. Tucker et al. (2004) studied the impact of intercultural adjustment on job performance among corporate executives in different countries and found that job performance was found to be strongly related to the criteria of intercultural adjustment. In her reviewed of international students in English-speaking universities by Andrade (2006), she identified English language proficiency, culture, support services, and educational background influenced the academic achievement of international students. For this study, academic achievement will influenced by the adjustment. To further examine this relationship, the following proposition is offered:

Proposition 8: *Psychological and sociocultural adjustment will be positively related with academic achievement.*

III. PROPOSED RESEARCH MODEL

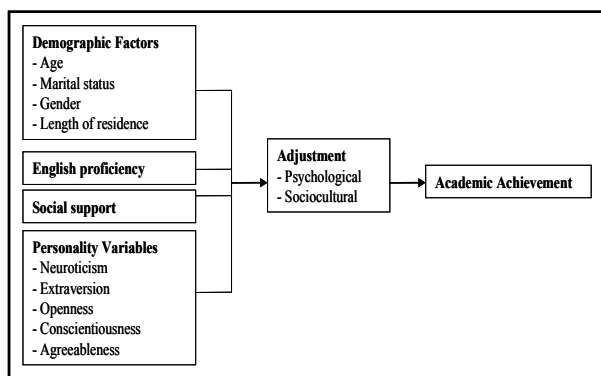With the above literature review, a research model is proposed as shown in Figure 1 for this study.

Fig. 1: Proposed research model.

IV. CONCLUSION

Are these variables the same for all source cultures and all host cultures? The framework only focused particularly on international students coming to Malaysian public universities. It seems possible that the experiences of students from other cultures and/or with different destinations will differ. The proposed framework will add to the understanding of international students' adjustment processes and offers many avenues for future empirical investigations.

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