INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS EXPERIENCE IN A MALAYSIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITY: SELF-EFFICACY AND SOCIO-CULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

Dr. Yusliza Mohd.Yusoff
Senior Lecturer
International Business Section
School of Management
Universiti Sains Malaysia
11800 USM, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.
Email: yusliza@usm.my

Shanthi Nadarajah
Ph.D Candidate
School of Management
Universiti Sains Malaysia
11800 USM, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia.
Email: sushan_82@yahoo.com

Abstract: Internalization of higher education is one of the important transformation processes of developing countries towards globalization. Further, globalization and democratization of higher education in Malaysia has raised much interest among educators and researchers to understand this phenomenon. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to survey the adaptation needs of international students within their academic and social communities in Malaysian universities. This study was aimed at investigating the relationship between self-efficacy and socio-cultural adjustment. The sample consisted of 185 (100 females, 85 males) international students in the university. The socio-cultural adjustment and self-efficacy dimensions of university international students were measured using the Socio-Cultural Adjustment Scale (SCAS) developed by Ward and Kennedy (1999) and the General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), respectively. Correlational analysis was employed to analyze data. Self-efficacy was not correlated with all dimensions of socio-cultural adjustment (cultural empathy, impersonal endeavors, and cultural relatedness).

Keywords: self-efficacy, socio-cultural adjustment, Malaysian university international students.

INTRODUCTION

Internationalization of higher education is an important issue which drives the intense interest and argued in the early years of 21st century. In this modern environment, the demand for higher education caused by many students which is focused to the importance of human development compare to economic development of their home country. The notion of internationalization of higher education is not something new for developed countries such as USA, UK, Canada, Japan and France which have been practiced for a long period. But many students from developing countries seems to have strong interest and significant stand up in the number of students to study abroad as there are narrowed approach to education in their home country (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). They explained that the mix of push and pull factors stimulates the students to seek for education internationally. "Push" factor functions between the origin country and lead the students in decision making to take up international study. Meanwhile, "pull" factor play its role internally in the host country as to grab the attentions of international students.

As quoted by Paige (1990), international students can be defined as personals that relocate themselves for a short period in other country compare to their origin country as to contribute in international higher education. The rise of international students in Malaysian universities creates the need to perceive and identify their cross-cultural adjustments to this country and also fit to be more notable. In depth, since 1996 the numbers of international students studying in Malaysia have been multiplied according to the improvised variety of higher education and also were notified that those international students accommodate into the higher learning institutions. As to achieve the target to be part of the leading International Education Hub in this territory, Malaysian government supports by having 20 public universities and more than 500 private universities and colleges. According to the latest statistics, various higher education institutions based in Malaysia have facilitated more than 90,000 international students. As of 31 December 2008, the Immigration Department records indicated that 90,501 of foreigners hold student passes. This supports to achieve the target of 100,000 in 2010 by Ministry of Higher Education. Based on the statistics provided by the Immigration Department, China (11,628) and Indonesia (14,359) form the highest number of international students in Malaysia. There are also quite a number of students from Middle East countries, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Iran (http://islamhadhari.net/?p=2543).

International students who plan to further their education in overseas have to prepare themselves to defeat the challenges that are linked to their adjustments practices. It is because they need to know how to differentiate the cultural values, norms, and customs between their home country and host country and also adjust themselves accordingly (Ang & Liamputtong, 2007). As studied in social learning model, socio-cultural adjustment is impacted by prior cross-cultural practices, cross distance, cross-cultural contact, cross-cultural training and the period of time in the new culture (Befus, 1988; Furnham & Bochner, 1982). Due to this view, international students can face challenges such as culture shock, lack of support, homesickness, limited social skills and stereotyping and prejudice; and many more. Overcoming these challenges might lead to stress and produce depressive symptoms which intervenes their educational practices (Jung et. al., 2007). Particularly, this study introduced the notion of cross-cultural adjustment and exercised them to conclude the correlations between self-efficacy and socio-cultural adjustments.

Problem Statement

Clearly, the transition to higher learning institution life, as with most life transitions, can be a stressful period in which many changes are taking place. Explaining the variance in successful adjustment to higher learning institution is important, and there are many factors to consider. Self-efficacy has been found to be a major factor helping individuals cope with stressful life transitions and ease their adjustment to the new environment. Few studies have looked at the relationship between self-efficacy and the adjustment among the international students (e.g., Hechanova-Alampay et al., 2002; Li & Gasser, 2005; Poyrazli et al., 2002). However, beyond these studies, researchers have not examined the correlation between general self-efficacy (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) and the three dimensions of socio-cultural adjustment (Ward & Kennedy, 1999). In addition, there have been no studies examine the relationship between these two variables among the international students in Malaysia. The present study aims to bridge this gap in the current literature.

The Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the correlation of the self-efficacy beliefs and socio-cultural adjustment of international undergraduate students.

Research Questions

The following specific questions were addressed in this study:
1. Is there a positive correlation between international undergraduate students' self-efficacy beliefs and their perceptions of their cultural empathy?
2. Is there a positive correlation between international undergraduate students' self-efficacy beliefs and their perceptions of their impersonal endeavors?
3. Is there a positive correlation between international undergraduate students' self-efficacy beliefs and their perceptions of their cultural relatedness?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following section contains relevant literature that provides the necessary background for this study.

Socio-Cultural Adjustment

Ward and her colleagues proposed and have developed socio-cultural model (e.g., Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward & Kennedy, 1992; Ward & Searle, 1991). Socio-cultural adjustment refers to "culture specific skills, the ability to negotiate the host culture, or effectively interact with members of host cultures (Searle & Ward, 1990). Theoretically, the model suggested that socio-cultural adjustment can be understood by a social learning context (e.g., socializing with host nationals).

Self-Efficacy

The general self-efficacy refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations (Bandura, 1997, p. 2). According to Bandura (1995), motivation, affective states, and actions displayed by humans frequently

result from what they believe rather than from an objective assessment of the situation. In other words, perceived causative capabilities are a source of human agency and the efficacy theory explains in great details how humans can develop and enhance their efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1995). Bandura believed perceived efficacy to be the fundamental basis of human motivation.

Schwarzer (1992) conceptualized general self-efficacy, which is concerned with more global and stable personal capability to address effectively many stressful situations. General self-efficacy is considered a personal resource or vulnerability factor that can influence a person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors. General self-efficacy reflects an optimistic self-belief of an individual (Schwarzer, 1992). General self-efficacy also tends to help an individual facilitate goalsetting, effort investment, persistence in face of barriers, recovery from setbacks, and emotional adaptiveness (Bandura, 1995; Poyrazli et al., 2002; Schwarzer, 1992). During the stressful transitional adaptation to a different culture, self-efficacy plays a critical role in protecting against negative experience and emotion, and health impairment (Jerusalem & Mittag, 1995).

Self Efficacy and Adjustment

According to Bandura (1986), students with high levels of self-efficacy in regards to their ability and personal competence are at lower risk for emotional maladjustment. Therefore, the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and adjustment appears to be positive. This statement has been confirmed by results of empirical studies (i.e., Hechanova-Alampay et al., Li & Gasser, 2005; Poyrazli et al., 2002). For example, Poyrazli et al. (2002) found that graduate international students with higher levels of academic self-efficacy reported fewer adjustment problems. Poyrazli et al. (2002) further argued that *"high academic self-efficacy likely helps students approach challenging situations without incapacitating anxiety or confusion. This high self-efficacy likely helps them feel that they have the ability and competence to deal with academic situations and problems. As a result, they would experience a better academic adjustment"*.

Similarly, Hechanova-Alampay et al. (2002) examined adjustment, strain, self-efficacy, cultural novelty, social support, and amount of interaction with host nationals among 294 domestic and international student sojourners in a medium-sized, mid-western university. They found that individuals with a high sense of confidence in their ability (self-efficacy) reported greater adjustment and less strain. The relationship of self-efficacy and adjustment and strain was stronger upon entry than after six months for both domestic and international sojourners. Another study by Li and Gasser (2005) examined predictors of Asian international students' socio-cultural adjustment. A total of 117 students from 17 Asian countries and regions completed questionnaires about their socio-cultural adjustment, contact with the hosts, ethnic identity, and cross-cultural self-efficacy. They found that contact with the hosts partially mediated the effect of cross-cultural self-efficacy on socio-cultural adjustment. Hence, to examine the relationship between general self-efficacy and socio-cultural adjustment, the following hypotheses are surmised:

> H1:   *Self-efficacy is positively correlated with cultural empathy.*
> H2:   *Self-efficacy is positively correlated with impersonal endeavors.*
> H3:   *Self-efficacy is positively correlated with cultural relatedness.*

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a correlational research design in order "to determine whether, and to what degree, a relationship exists between two or more variables" (Gay, 1996, p. 316). Correlational design was used in this study to examine the correlation between the general self-efficacy beliefs and socio-cultural adjustment of international undergraduate students.

Site for this Study and Sample

The site for this study was a public university in Northern Region of Malaysia. The method for selecting the sample for this study represented a sampling technique known as convenience sampling.

International Undergraduate Students

Participants were 185 international undergraduate students enrolled in a large public university in the Northern region of Malaysia. In all, 85 were male (45.9%) and 100 were female (54.1%). The students were from a variety of different countries (48.1% from China, 14.1% from Indonesia, 10.3% from Finland, 7.0% from Canada, 4.3% from Thailand, 3.2% from France, 2.7 % from Saudi Arabia, 2.2 % from Korea, and 8.1% from other countries such as Maldives, Nigeria, Singapore, Cambodia, Sudan, Iran, and the United States) and identified a variety of different languages as their native languages (Mandarin: 48.1%; Indonesian: 13.5%; English: 10.3%; Finnish: 9.7%; Thai: 3.8%; French and Arabic: 3.2% respectively; Korean: 2.2%). The average age was 21.2 years ($SD = 1.53$) and their average length of stay in Malaysia was 16 months ($SD = 12.64$). More than three fourths (98.4%) of the subjects were single and 1.6% of the subjects were married. All faculties were represented, with more than half of the students enrolled in the School of Management (56.2%).

Measuring Instruments

The General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995) was administered to assess the international students' self-beliefs to cope with a variety of difficult demands in life. The scale explicitly refers to personal agency, which is the belief that one's actions are responsible for successful outcomes. Adjustment to life in a new culture requires dealing with various situations and facing many challenges and, therefore, general self-efficacy is the most appropriate way to assess factors related to international students' adjustment. The scale consists of 10 items. For each item, international students will be rated on a five-point Likert scale (1=*strongly disagree* to 5=*strongly agree*).

29-item socio-cultural adjustment scale (SCAS) developed by Ward and Kennedy (1999) was used in the present study. The scale measured the degree to which international students perceived difficulties in understanding the local values and cultures, interacting with the hosts, meeting the demands of daily life, and behaving in a culturally appropriate manner. Sample items included: "Using the transport system" and "Taking a local perspective on the culture". International students used a 5-point likert scale ranging from *no difficulty* (1) to *extreme difficulty* (5).

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis was carried out with the help of the SPSS program (Version 17.0). First, factor analysis was carried out and then, Cronbach alpha coefficients were computed to assess the reliability of the constructs which were measured in this study. Descriptive statistics were used to explore the data. Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were used to specify the relationships between the variables. A cut-off point of 0.30 (medium effect, Cohen, 1988) was set for the practical significance of correlation coefficients. The researchers' theoretical model was tested in this correlation analysis.

RESULTS

Socio-Cultural Adjustment Construct Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

An exploratory factor analysis was conducted using principle component analysis and varimax rotation to extract factors. Three factors were extracted based on eigenvalues greater than 1 and item loadings greater than .40. The three factors explained 62.93% of the total variance of Socio-Cultural Adjustment. Three items (7, 13, and 19) had communalities values of less than 0.5 and five items (10, 12, 20, 21, and 22) had high cross loading were deleted from further analysis. The first factor, whose items were labelled the Cultural Empathy, included items 14, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, and 29. This factor accounted for 29.65% of the variance. Factor 2 accounted for 20.07% of the total variance and included items 8, 9, 16, 17, 18, and 20; this set of items was labelled the Impersonal Endeavors. Factor 3 accounted for 17.26% of the total variance and included items 2, 4, 7, 11, and 13. This set of items was labelled Cultural Relatedness. The results of the exploratory factor analysis indicated that the twenty one items were clearly loading on three factors, thus providing additional empirical support to previous studies. Table 1 shows the results of factor analysis.

Table 1
Factor Analysis of Socio-Cultural Adjustment

Item	Factors		
	F1	F2	F3
FACTOR 1: Cultural Empathy			
Item 14	.58		
Item 23	.71		
Item 24	.80		
Item 25	.71		
Item 26	.75		
Item 27	.80		
Item 28	.63		
Item 29	.72		
FACTOR 2: Impersonal Endeavors			
Item 3		.56	
Item 8		.66	
Item 9		.60	
Item 15		.66	
Item 16		.71	
Item 17		.78	
Item 18		.69	
FACTOR 3: Cultural Relatedness			
Item 1			.64

Item	Factors		
	F1	**F2**	**F3**
Item 2			.76
Item 4			.62
Item 5			.60
Item 6			.59
Item 11			.64
Eigenvalue	10.42	1.48	1.32
Percentage of Variance	49.64	7.02	6.26
Total Variance Explained	49.64	56.66	62.93
KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	.94		
Approximate Chi-Square	2488.01***		

Note. $N = 185$. Items included for the respective factors are underlined for identification; ***$P<.001$.

Self-Efficacy Construct Exploratory Factor Analysis Results

The factor analysis result for Self-Efficacy is shown in Table 2. Ten items were used to measure this construct. The analysis resulted in a single factor solution with eigenvalue of 6.10. This criterion is in line with Kaiser's rule, which states that only factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0 are significant for analytical purposes. The factor explained 61.04 percent of the total variance. All items were represented the Self-Efficacy measure.

Table 2
Factor Analysis of Self-Efficacy

Items	Factor
	F1
Item 1	.81
Item 2	.71
Item 3	.78
Item 4	.79
Item 5	.76
Item 6	.82
Item 7	.75
Item 8	.80
Item 9	.77
Item 10	.83
Eigenvalue	6.10
Percentage of Variance	61.04
Total Variance Explained	61.04
KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy	.94
Approximate Chi-Square	1106.56***

Note. $N = 185$. Items included for the respective factors are underlined for identification; ***P<.001.

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 3 provides means, standard deviations, and internal consistency estimates for cultural empathy, impersonal endeavors, cultural relatedness, and self-efficacy.

Cronbach's alpha for each factor was calculated: α=.93 for Cultural Empathy (8 items), α=.89 for Impersonal Endeavors (7 items), α=.84 for Cultural Relatedness (6 items), and α=.93 for

Self-Efficacy (10 items). All the values were greater than .70 cut-off value suggested by Nunnally (1978).

Table 3
Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities for Cultural Empathy, Impersonal Endeavors, Cultural Relatedness, and Self-Efficacy.

Variable	*M*	*SD*	*α*
1. Cultural Empathy	2.39	.89	.93
2. Impersonal Endeavors	2.20	.79	.89
3. Cultural Relatedness	2.22	.82	.84
4. Self-Efficacy	3.66	.73	.93

Correlation Analysis Results (H1-H3)

To examine the relationship between Self-Efficacy and Socio-Cultural Adjustment, a correlation analysis was used. Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 predicted a positive correlation between self-efficacy and all three dimensions of Socio-Cultural Adjustment: (a) Cultural Empathy, (b) Impersonal Endeavors, and (c) Cultural Relatedness.

The results of the correlation analysis showed that the correlation was significant between self-efficacy and cultural empathy ($r = -.27$, $p<.01$), self-efficacy and impersonal endeavors ($r = -.31$, $p<.01$) and self-efficacy and cultural relatedness ($r = -.21$, $p<.01$). Even though it was significant, but all hypotheses are rejected because it was hypothesized in an opposite direction. Thus, there was no support for the predicted relationship. Summary of the correlation analysis is provided in Table 4.

Table 4
Correlation Results

No	Variables	1	2	3	4
1.	Cultural Empathy	1.00			
2.	Impersonal Endeavors	.74**	1.00		
3.	Cultural Relatedness	.66**	.69**	1.00	
4.	Self-Efficacy	-.27**	-.31**	-.21**	1.00

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

CONCLUSIONS

The results of statistical analysis showed that international undergraduate students' scores on the General Self-efficacy Scale did not correlate significantly with their scores on the three dimensions of the Socio-cultural Adjustment Scale. Given these findings, there appeared to be no relationship between international undergraduate students' on the General Self-efficacy Scale and the Socio-cultural Adjustment Scale. In other words, scores obtained by international undergraduate students' on those four respective scales were unrelated to each other. This finding was contrary to the expectations based on the review of the literature.

The lack of relationship in this study may be attributed to two factors: characteristics of instrumentation and sample. Specifically, the Socio-cultural Adjustment Scale consists of 29 items covering a wide range of aspects of living and performing in a foreign culture, which perhaps turned out to be not specific enough to the university culture to truly assess

international undergraduate students' level of comfort as related to being foreign students at a Malaysian university. In future studies, a more specific scale that focuses on the university culture might be used to better sample the concept of socio-cultural adaptation of international undergraduate students. Additionally, the reason why the current research results did not replicate previous findings linking self-efficacy to adjustment could be the difference in sample make up. The current study's sample consisted of undergraduate students while previous studies looked at expatriates and repatriates. Undergraduate students are different from expatriates and repatriates in that they are usually older and therefore have accumulated more experiences relating to new environment life. With this in mind, it can be expected that the result of these two respective groups would be different.

Limitations

In discussing the results of the present study, interpretations should be made with great caution on several counts. First, the characteristics of the SCAS Scale must be critically evaluated. Some of the items on the scale are stated in rather general terms and therefore might be inadequate to properly assess students' actual level of comfort with regards to socio-cultural aspects in a university setting. In addition, the SCAS was primarily designed to be distributed to expatriates and repatriates in Western context and it was possible that the international undergraduate students studied in Malaysian culture were unclear as to how they needed to interpret the statements. Perhaps, measurement used by Jou and Fukada (1996) on cross-cultural adjustment can be used in future studies on international students' adjustment research, since their study focused on adjustment of Chinese international students in Japanese university. Japan and Malaysia are classified in Asian countries that share the same culture. Research on international students need to be explored because according to the latest news, Malaysia is ranked the 37th best country in the world and is among the top three Asian countries in the global standing and Malaysia is placed below Japan (9) and Singapore (20) according to Newsweek magazine (The Star, 21st August 2010). In addition, Malaysia is also listed as the eight best in education among the upper middle-income countries (The Star, 21st August 2010).

The second limitation is related to the sample of the study. The results of this research cannot be generalized due to the fact that the entire sample was taken from individuals from one location: the Northern region of Malaysia. A third, limitation of the study is that, the results cannot be generalized because all of the international students in the sample are adjusting to one particular culture: Malaysia. A fourth limitation of the study is that no control variable was included to the hypotheses. Research has indicated that age, marital status, gender, length of stay, and English language proficiency are related with adjustment (Polek, et al., 2008; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Poyrazli et al., 2002; Sumer et al., 2008). A fifth limitation of the study is that although relationship was found between independent and dependent variables, a cross-sectional study is not able to assign cause-and-effect relationships between the variables. The last limitation of this study is its accuracy and reliability if the students did not totally understand the questionnaire. Many subjects provided feedback on difficulties in understanding the survey questionnaire. There might be inevitably different levels of English proficiency among the participants because majority of the respondents were from China. Therefore, some participants might not be able to respond correctly to the questionnaire because of their lack of English proficiency.

Acknowledgements

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