

# Academic and Social Adjustment of International Undergraduates: A Quantitative Approach

Azizah Rajab, Shah Rollah Abdul Wahab, Roziana Shaari, Siti Aisyah Panatik, and Faizah Mohd Nor

**Abstract**—The main purpose of this paper is to examine the college adjustment of international undergraduates in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Three hundred and seventy eight international undergraduates completed the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). Data were analyzed using Social Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18 for percentages and mean. The finding indicated that the majority of international undergraduates in UTM are moderately adjusted in terms of academic, social, personal emotional adjustment and institutional attachment. The results of this study should help various units to make better strategic plan as to enhance international undergraduates' adjustment in the institution.

**Index Terms**—Academic adjustment, international undergraduate, personal-emotional, social adjustment.

## I. INTRODUCTION

For various reasons, a growing number of international undergraduates choose to pursue their higher education outside their own country. Some may want to experience or explore a new environment. A lot of them would probably like to try out a different education system. Many may even wish to understand anew culture poles apart from their own. In fact, most of them carefully select other countries with high expectations anticipating that the chosen countries education system if of better quality and can offer a better atmosphere than their own. In the midst of all this, Malaysia is suddenly gaining worldwide attention from scores of international students who wish to pursue their higher education degree. There are many possible explanations for choosing Malaysia as their higher learning education destination and many feasible factors that contribute to this sudden world interest. One of the most likely reasons could be due to its international reputation. Even something like cheaper tuition fees compared to other institutions around the globe could be a contributing feature. Undeniably, Malaysia offers quality and competitive education which is equivalent to other reputable universities around the world with its affordable cost of living, reliable learning and service facilities on campus [1]. Reasons include economic and political stability with various ethnic groups living in harmony.

Other major factor including international recognition of the education quality in Malaysia may give a slight

advantage to higher learning institutions in this country. Generally, most of the international undergraduates who came to this country, have relatives or friends who have either graduated or are still pursuing their degree and have given a good recommendation based on their previous experience. A number of international students choose Malaysia as they are assured of better employment in their home countries upon graduation. In fact, most of them anticipate fewer problems as they predict that they will not face difficulty in terms of language as the majority of Malaysians can converse in English. Unknown to them college life far away from home for the first time brings unexpected new challenges and first-hand encounters. It is anticipated that they will feel new and different pressures when adjusting to this new environment. High hopes of performing and achieving well in their academics especially from family and sponsor are also expected. The question is, are these international undergraduates able to adapt and acclimatize themselves to the institution they have chosen in this country? Are they able to familiarize and socialize in unfamiliar surroundings? Are they able to adjust emotionally due to their young age?

This issue is crucial and should not be taken lightly due to the postulation that it may affect students' academic performance and achievement which may result in severe repercussions including the inability to graduate and obtain the sought after degree. Thus, this study is conducted to investigate college adjustment among international undergraduates in UTM, based on four dimensions namely academic, social, personal-emotional adjustment and institutional attachment

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Schneiders [2] stated that individual adjustment is an individual maturity process and mans' behavior in facing his needs with the environment. This statement is similar to Lazarus [3] definition of adjustment. He believes that adjustment means immersing oneself in a new environment and adapting to that environment to suit one's needs. According to him, self refers to the individual's unique way of adapting to different situations compared to others. Arkoff [4] is fixed on the notion that self-adjustment is something that we do by ourselves to adjust to the environment and is different from others. The individual needs to undergo an adaptation self-process with the surroundings making the situation suit the needs of the individual so that the association is favorable not only to the individual but also the environment.

This study closely follows Baker and Szyrk [5] adjustment theory which was divided into four dimensions namely

Manuscript received July 20, 2013; revised September 24, 2013.

Azizah Rajab and Faizah Mohd Nor are with the Language Academy, Johor Bahru Campus, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (e-mail: r\_azie@yahoo.com).

Shah Rollah Abdul Wahab, Roziana Shaari, and Siti Aisyah Panatik are with the Faculty of Management, Johor Bahru Campus, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

academic, social, personal emotional and institutional adjustment. Therefore, in this study, academic adjustment refers to international undergraduate attitude and self-motivation to achieve academic success. In line with Shaffer and Shoben [6] distinction of adjustment and adaptation, this study defined adjustment as the reduction or satisfaction of short-term needs, whereas adaptation refers to the necessity of individual long-term 'survival'. Accordingly, adaptation refers to how well international undergraduates adapt themselves to the new surroundings and environment as they begin a study program for a degree that will take at least four years to complete. It is very important for international students to get themselves adjusted to the new institution without feeling alienated and they need to go through this adaptation process as quickly as possible. Schneiders [2] describes adaptation as a process that not only involves mental but also individual behavior. He believes that every individual has aims and objectives that have to be achieved and they must be achieved at the same time that the individual is enduring constant pressure from the environment that to a certain extent forces the individual to take action to adjust. The adaptation process takes place when there is a response in terms of both mental and individual behavior to guide him through all the stages in his learning process. When he manages to resolve all the struggles in the new environment, it means there is a concession between the needs of self and the needs of the institution. Therefore, in the context of this study adaptation refers to how international undergraduates adjust themselves to the new surroundings since little research has been conducted to evaluate the academic, social, personal-emotional and institutional attachment of the international undergraduates in this institution. Hence, this research is considered timely in addressing the matter as the need to understand their adjustment to college can help UTM to either retain the system presently offered or improve the system to make it better depending on the findings of this study.

### III. METHODOLOGY

This study used the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire [7] which consists of 67 items using a 9-point scale of 'applied very closely to me' to 'doesn't apply to me at all'. The SACQ contains four dimensions mainly academic adjustment with 24 items, social adjustment with 20 items, personal-emotional adjustment with 15 items and institutional attachment with 15 items. The Cronbach Alpha for this study is 0.879. Questionnaire was distributed throughout UTM campus during the 2012/2013 (Session I) academic year. A total of 378 international undergraduates from various faculties took part in this study. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) for Windows version 18 for frequency and mean.

### IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The above Table I shows the total number of respondents based on the three levels (low, moderate and high) according to the four dimensions.

TABLE I: TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS' BASED ON LEVELS

Dimension/ Level	Low (1.00- 3.69)	Moderate (3.70- 6.29)	High (6.30-9.00)
Academic Adjustment	52	324	2
Social Adjustment	44	328	6
Personal Emotional Adjustment	69	308	1
Institutional Attachment	55	321	2

TABLE II: THE RESPONDENTS OVERALL MEAN BASED ON THE FOUR DIMENSIONS

Dimension	Mean
Academic Adjustment	4.73
Social Adjustment	4.80
Personal-Emotional Adjustment	4.26
Institutional Attachment	4.59
Overall	4.62

The above Table II shows the overall mean based on the four dimensions namely academic, social, personal-emotional adjustment and institutional attachment.

TABLE III: MEAN OF SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

Item	Mean
Decision to attend this college in particular	5.34
Close social ties in college	5.22
Satisfied with the extracurricular available in college	5.22
Have good friends at college with whom I can talk about my problem	5.29
Quite satisfied with my social life at college	5.25

Table III shows the five highest mean of social adjustment out of twenty items.

TABLE IV: MEAN OF ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT

Item	Mean
I know why I am in college and what I want out of it	5.41
My academic goals and purposes are well defined	5.33
Getting a college degree is very important to me	5.34
I am attending classes regularly	5.24
I am enjoying my academic work at college	5.32

Table IV shows the five highest mean of academic adjustment out of twenty-four overall items.

Based on Table I and Table II, the results of this study reveal that the social adjustment among the international undergraduates is moderate ( $m=4.80$ ) with the majority of the respondents (328 out of 378) in this category. In fact, social adjustment holds the highest mean from the four adjustment dimensions. Social adjustment is a measure of how respondents feel when they get adjusted socially. It involves campus society, how they feel when they are in this society, who they identify with and how well they mingle and gain acceptance in the campus environment. Generally, social adjustment can be influenced by the support network and the ability of the students to find and make new friends which according to Cohorn and Giuliano [8] can be the strongest predictor of social adjustment. In terms of preference, the item 'Decision to attend this college in particular' ( $m=5.34$ ) was ranked first, 'Have good friends at college with whom I can talk about any problem' ( $m=5.29$ ) was ranked second and 'Quite satisfied with my social life at college' ( $m=5.25$ ) was ranked third out of 20 items enquired (refer to Table III). The results indicate that the environment

in UTM which includes the atmosphere in class or where they live can have an important impact on the personal or educational development of international undergraduates. International undergraduates who make friends easily are more likely to adjust well to the new location which may indirectly result in lower levels of stress, loneliness and homesickness. The results of this study disclose that the international undergraduates in UTM are able to mingle in setting with unfamiliar social customs and manage to interact with the community as stated by the item '*Quite satisfied with my social life at college*' ( $m=5.25$ ). This is in agreement with Hurtado, Carter and Spuler [9], who stated that students would feel at ease once they get acquainted with their college environment. The results of this study indicate that the international undergraduates feel quite satisfied with their social life on campus, are pleased about their decision to attend this university and can accept the new environment. By looking at the result of this study, it is assumed that they are aware that college life is literally not as difficult as they think it is and they are able to make new friends in UTM. This is consistent with Beyer and Goossens [10] belief that students who had positive feelings toward being separated from their parents during college are a predictor of adjusting to the college environment. This may be due to the reliable support system provided in UTM where most of the local undergraduates are enlisted to help provide social encouragement to these international undergraduates. As a result, the majority of international undergraduates in UTM are able to develop skills which enable them to be less dependent on their family and view the separation from their family in order to pursue their degree in a positive light.

The second highest result among the four dimensions is academic adjustment which is also moderate ( $m=4.73$ ) with the majority of the respondents (324 out of 378 respondents) in this category (refer to Table I and Table II). The result suggests that the international undergraduates are adjusting well in the institution contrary to some who believe that they might not be able to adjust well in a new environment. In terms of preference, the item '*I know why I am in college and what I want*' ( $m=5.41$ ) was ranked first, '*Getting a college degree is very important to me*' ( $m=5.34$ ) was ranked second and '*My academic goals and purposes are well defined*' ( $m=5.33$ ) was ranked third out of 24 items (refer to Table IV). These results indicate that the international undergraduates can recognize the importance of social and academic adjustment. In addition, they recognize why they are in the present institution and why it is vital for them to adjust quickly to the new environment socially and academically. The results also reveal that as their country's economy slowly recovers from recession that jobs are going to be difficult to find for those seeking employment, especially those without certifiable credentials, which indicates that the international undergraduates comprehend the value and importance of getting a college degree. Consequently, they are also aware of the purpose and rationale behind adjusting well academically in the new locality. The results of this study confirmed that most of the international undergraduates in UTM did manage to adjust academically, were thinking seriously about their education and probably their future career goals which accounts for

them having successfully adapted and learned to survive within the new environment as quickly as possible in order not to jeopardize their academic performance.

This is consistent with the definition of self-determination put forward by Feldt, Graham and Dew [11]. According to them, self-determination is the "ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself (164)." This definition emphasizes knowing oneself, making choices, taking control, believing in oneself, and taking action to reach one's goals. From this result it can be concluded that the international undergraduates do manage to adjust academically in UTM because they must maintain their academic achievement in order to get their college degree. Self-determination is what causes the international undergraduates to act and as a student they have to motivate themselves to face pressures and challenges that come with distance from family and their struggle to survive without the support they are used to back home.

## V. CONCLUSION

Determining and assessing international undergraduates' adjustment to college has a lot to do not only with the behavior of the students but also the structure and function of the institution that they attended away from their home country. The results of this study indicated that the international undergraduates in UTM have managed to adapt socially and academically to the new surrounding in campus thus improving their chances of survival in the campus society and environment. As stated by Field and Hoffman [12], for students to be successful and to overcome their challenges and obstacles in college, it is important to become socially and academically integrated.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The author would like to express appreciation to the Ministry of Higher Education and Universiti Teknologi Malaysia. This study was supported by the following grant sponsors; Research University Grant (GUP) Funding, Vote No. Q.J130000.2461.07J97

## REFERENCES

- [1] A. Rajab, S. A. Panatik, H. Abdul Rahman, and R. Shaari, "Quality management: from effective service to innovative facility," *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 40, pp. 509-513, 2012.
- [2] A. Schneiders, *Personal Adjustment and Mental Health*, New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1964.
- [3] R. S. Lazarus, *Emotion and Adaptation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- [4] A. Arkoff, *Adjustment and Mental Health*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1968.
- [5] R. W. Baker and B. Siyrc, *SACQ Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire Manual*, Los Angeles, CA: Western Psychological Services, 1989.
- [6] E. J. Shaffer and L. F. Shoben, *The Psychology of Adjustment*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1956.
- [7] R. W. Baker and B. Siyrc, "Measuring adjustment to college," *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, vol. 31, pp. 179-189, 1984.
- [8] C. A. Cohorn and T. A. Giuliano, "Predictors of adjustment and institutional attachment in first-year college students," *Psi Chi Journal of Undergraduate Research*, vol. 4, pp. 47-56, 1999.
- [9] S. Hurtado, D. E. Carter, and A. Spuler, "Latino student transition to college: Assessing difficulties and factors in successful college adjustment," *Research in Higher Education*, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 135-157, 1996.

- [10] W. Beyer and L. Goossens, "Psychological separation and adjustment to university: moderating effects of gender, age, and perceived parenting style," *Journal of Adolescent Research*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 363-382, 2003.
- [11] R. G. Feldt, M. Graham, and D. Dew, "Measuring adjustment to college: Construct validity of the student adaptation to college questionnaire," *Measurement and Evaluation in Counseling and Development*, vol. 44, pp. 92-104, 2011.
- [12] S. Field and A. Hoffman, *Steps to Self-Determination: The Self-Determination Curriculum*, Austin, TX: PRO-ED, 1996.

**Azizah Rajab** is a senior lecturer at the Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus. She obtained her Phd in Applied Linguistics from Leicester University, United Kingdom in 1996. She is with UTM for more than 23 years and currently active in research related to Second Language, Educational Psychology, Higher Education and Social Science. (Tel: +6075531775; Fax: +6075566911; email: azizah@utm.my).

**Shah Rollah Abdul Wahab** is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus. He obtained his Phd in Management from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Malaysia in 2011. He is with UTM for more than 11 years and currently active in research related to Safety Management, Transformational Leadership and Employee Training (Tel: +6075531838; Fax: +6075566911; email: shah@management.utm.my).

**Roziana Shaari** is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus. She obtained her Phd in Computer Science from Universiti Teknologi Malaysia in 2009. She is with UTM for more than 15 years and currently active in research related to Human Resource Development, Knowledge Sharing, Individual and Organizational Learning (Tel: +6075535131; Fax: +6075566911; email: rozianas@management.utm.my)

**Siti Aisyah Abdul Rahman** is a senior lecturer of Psychology at the Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus. She obtained her Phd in Psychology (Industrial/Organisational) from Waikato University, New Zealand in 2010. She is currently active in research related to Psychology, Work-Life Balance, Occupational Well-Being and Positive Psychology. (Tel: +6075531775; Fax: +6075566911; email: sitiaisyah@management.utm.my)

**Faizah Mohd Nor** is an associate professor at the Language Academy, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus. She obtained her Phd in TESL from UTM and has been working with the same institution for more than 20 years and her research include English for Specific Purposes, Teacher Training and ELT Methodology. (Tel: +6075531852; Fax: +6075566911; email: m-faizah@utm.my)