

# Acculturative Stress among International Students

Azizah Rajab, Hamidah Abdul Rahman, Siti Aisyah Panatik, and Nur Syazwin Mansor

**Abstract**—The role of foreign students in higher education sector in Malaysia is increasing. Thus, with the growing number of these students, administrators and academics are identifying ways to enable them to adapt to the new environment. This study aims to assess the level of acculturative stress experienced by international undergraduates in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM). Three hundred and seventy eight students completed the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS). Data were analyzed using Social Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 18 and the results indicated that the majority of international undergraduates are suffering moderately from some degree of cultural stress especially for items relating to change or culture shock, homesickness and perceived hate. The findings suggest that there are calls for several improvements to programs designed to assist the international undergraduates adapt to their new cultural setting.

**Index Terms**—Acculturative stress, culture shock, homesickness, perceived hate.

## I. INTRODUCTION

How individuals cope with adjustment has been studied for many years by researchers as every individual faces an adjustment period in their life as they move into a new environment. Similar situations will be encountered by students who enter a new institution for further study in a foreign country. They will have to adjust not only to the new environment in that particular country, but also the society, food, traditions and religion that come as a package. Life in the new surroundings can bring many challenges to the students particularly if they are living away from home for the first time. Being away from their family means they will have to survive without the support system that they had in their own environment, which can pose possible danger in the form of stress. They will also experience new pressures especially with the high hopes of performing and achieving well in their academics from family and sponsors in the new education system. According to Sandhu and Asrabadi [1], moving from their hometown to a new environment may result in internal stress and missing their family, friends and homesickness are common symptoms expressed by foreign students. Even though they require more time to adapt and adjust to the new environments, success for these students comes in the forms of adjusting well to the institution and the ability to adapt to psychological stress. Thus, when moving to a new country, the aim of the students is to become

accustomed with the new environments, people and to become familiar with the culture and social life in the new country. There are numerous studies on adjustment in various disciplines including organization and health. For example, a study by Mackay and Pakenham [2] focuses on adjustment among caretakers of mental adult patients due to high stress levels associated with taking care of the patient. The study finds that the best way to deal with stress is through high social support as well as being optimistic, forming good relationships with patients and stress adaptation on behalf of caretakers. In the context of this study, Malaysia is also experiencing an overflow of foreign students into the country as a result of government policy of 2009 which opened the doors for international enrolment in its higher learning institution. Even though the number of international students is increasing dramatically every year, study on international students' adaptation to the country and culture is not getting similar attention in line with its international reputation. Acculturation in the context of this study refers to the replacement of the traits of one culture with those of another during the process of studying in the host country.

International students come from different countries, and bring with them a distinctive personality from their own culture. According to Charles and Steward [3], cultural sensitivity is an important element which influences international students. They may be confused about the cultural differences between their own culture and Malaysian culture which can affect their goals, beliefs, feelings and motivation. Tseng and Newton [4] share the same sentiment stating that it is important for international students to immediately adjust to the new environment to minimize the potential of cultural issues arising. To them, students need to learn how to deal with differences in intercultural contacts, social life and food. The fact is, when international undergraduates enroll in UTM, they are required to take a course on Bahasa Melayu for the purpose of equipping and exposing them to the local culture and at the same time developing their language skill. Even though the underlying principle is genuinely to give them exposure to the culture of the host country, this may contribute to the existing pressure as adapting to the new environment may prove to be difficult and problematic which may result in acculturative stress. Previous research shows that 60 to 70 per cent international students suffer from this feeling [5]. A new culture often challenges international students' belief and values. They must consider different ways of thinking and behaving as they adjust to the new environment. Due to these cultural changes such as language limitation, different academic system and loss of friends and peers from home, they are subjected to stress [6]. Is pressure or stress imposed upon them when adjusting to the new environment in UTM? Hence this study is important especially in disseminating information and giving clearer pictures to the outside world of the acculturative stress experienced by the international

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Azizah Rajab and Nur Syazwin Mansor are with the Language Academy, Johor Bahru Campus, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia.

Hamidah Abdul Rahman and Siti Aisyah Panatik are with the Faculty of Management, Johor Bahru Campus, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (e-mail: r\_azie@yahoo.com).

students who are enrolled in the institution. Are the international undergraduates in UTM able to adapt and acclimatize themselves to the institution that they have chosen? Are they able to adjust to the stress they face in unfamiliar surroundings? Therefore, this study is conducted with the aim of assessing the level of acculturative stress experienced by international undergraduates in UTM. It is hoped that the study is able to contribute to our understanding of acculturative stress and related problems faced by international undergraduates.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study used the Acculturative Stress Scale for International Students (ASSIS) developed by Sandhu and Asrabadi [1] in order to determine the acculturative stress of 378 international undergraduates in UTM. It is a 36-item scale adapted to a 5-point Likert scale (originally 7-point scale 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree). ASSIS consists of 7 subscales; Perceived discrimination (eight items), Homesickness (four items), Perceived hate (five items), Fear (four items), Stress due to change/culture shock (three items), Guilt (two items), and Miscellaneous (10 items). A reliability test was conducted on ASSIS and the Cronbach alpha was reported as 0.89 with higher scores indicative of greater acculturative stress.

## III. FINDINGS

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

TABLE I: TOTAL NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS' BASED ON LEVELS

Dimension/Level	Low (1.00- 2.33)	Moderate (2.33- 3.64)	High (3.65- 5.00)	Overall Mean
Perceived Discrimination	74	265	39	2.85
Homesickness	87	228	63	2.93
Perceived Hate	68	285	25	2.89
Fear	65	293	20	2.87
Stress due to change/culture shock	21	277	80	3.08
Guilt	106	206	66	2.84
Miscellaneous	66	286	26	2.85
Overall	50	301	27	2.88
Acculturative stress				

TABLE II: THE RESPONDENTS MEAN BASED ON HOMESICKNESS

Item	Mean
Homesickness bothers me	3.13
I feel sad leaving my relatives behind	2.88

Table II shows the two highest mean items for homesickness.

TABLE III: THE RESPONDENTS MEAN BASED ON PERCEIVED HATE

Item	Mean
Others do appreciate my cultural values	3.25
Others are sarcastic toward my cultural values	2.90

Table IV shows the two highest mean items for perceived hate.

TABLE IV: THE RESPONDENTS MEAN BASED ON STRESS DUE TO CHANGE/CULTURE SHOCK

Item	Mean
I feel comfortable in adjusting to new cultural values	2.65
I feel comfortable in adjusting to new food	2.58

Table IV shows the two highest mean items for stress due to change/culture shock.

## IV. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The results indicate that majority of the international undergraduates experience moderate acculturative stress ( $m=2.88$ , Table I). Based on the 7 subscales, the findings clearly point to dimension of stress due to change/culture shock, followed closely by homesickness and perceived hate (refer to Table I) as the highest mean of acculturative stress experienced by the international undergraduates. The results undoubtedly accentuate that international undergraduates' in UTM come from different countries and adjusting to the new community which is rather conservative and traditional in nature, may be a bit tricky and difficult for them to understand. The moderate result proves that it is more difficult for international undergraduates to adapt to a host society which is multi-cultural with multi-composite ethnic groups as in UTM. Perhaps the international undergraduates do not manage to make a completely successful transition to Malaysian culture due to the short time period before the data was collected which did not give the international undergraduates ample time to adjust or develop social networks with the locals to build connectedness. According to Pederson [7] culture shock occurs when an individual is forced to adapt to a social life that is different and not the same as his previous lifestyle. In fact, the results of this study, *I feel comfortable in adjusting to new cultural values* ( $m=2.65$ ) and *I feel comfortable in adjusting to new food* ( $m=2.58$ , Table IV), which show moderate finding, validate Oberg's [8] theory of negative symptom. He believes that an individual suffers from culture shock when they experience stress in terms of psychology adaptation, loss of friends, fear of rejection in the new culture or confusion in terms of function in the new culture which consequently result in anxious feelings, hate and anger towards the different culture. This is consistent with the findings of a study put forward by Berry *et al.* [9] that it is important for international students to develop social networks with peers because these friendships facilitate social adjustment and indirectly reduce stress. They emphasize that knowing and believing in oneself, making choices, taking control and action to reach one's goals is very important. Therefore, the international undergraduates in UTM should learn to manage stress, believe in themselves and adjust academically because they are under constant pressure to maintain their academic achievement in order to get their college degree. In order to lower their stress due to change or culture shock, possessing self-determination can help the international undergraduates to act and motivate themselves to face pressures and challenges that come with the distance from family and their struggle to survive without the support they are used to back home in avoiding stress due to change or culture shock in a new environment.

The result also reveals that homesickness arises when students are far away from home, family, friends and

environment that they are used to [10]. This will cause in the individual feeling homesick because he wants to return to a familiar environment. This always happens to international students who are away from family due to either feelings of loneliness, missing the family, food, lifestyle and their own culture. These conditions may worsen due to their unwillingness to share their emotions and feelings with others. Acculturative stress and cultural difference may lead to international students to become socially isolated from their peers leading to homesickness. Results of this study are closely related with Hayes and Lin [11] who report that international students rarely express their emotions or social concerns or problems with their peers because they only establish contact with their course mates while they are in class. Since language is related to the society and culture in which one lives, when people communicate in the same language they create relationship through communication and social life. Language barriers can develop into homesickness as indicated by the result of this study where homesickness is the second highest mean ( $m=2.93$ , Table I) after culture shock. As the result is moderate, the international undergraduates in UTM are assumed to be suffering from homesickness one way or another (*Homesickness bothers me*,  $m=3.13$ , Table II). In this study perceive hate is when international undergraduates feel that the environment too uncomfortable for them to live. It refers to perceive negative attitude of people around the international undergraduates. In the context of acculturative stress, it refers to feelings of hate which are the individuals' negative feelings for the culture surrounding them [12]. This is closely related to Sandhu and Asrabadi [1] theory that an individual feels that the people around him are sarcastic towards his culture in terms of clothing, language and other (*Others do appreciate my cultural values* ( $m=3.25$ , Table III), *Others are sarcastic toward my cultural values* ( $m=2.90$ )). As the international students' attitude become more negative, Udry [13] presented a model of social support that consists of four types of support which include esteem/emotional, informational, tangible and motivational. Adopting this model, UTM can provide an important emotional support through empathy and affection towards the international undergraduates through programs designed for them. Motivational support will be provided by way of encouragement and informational support, and the provision of useful advice and information in terms of supervision or an academic advisor. If international students develop friendships with other local students they may be able to overcome problems encountered related to perceived hate in the institutions they are enrolled in. From Berry [14] perspective, since acculturative stress can simply be defined as the stress resulting from acculturation process, it is clear that acculturative stress has an impact on the adaptation phase of international undergraduates. The results of this study are consistent with the views of Cemalcilar and Falbo [15] who considered that entering a new culture is a difficult and challenging process that may result in problems or difficulties in the adjustment process of international students. Generally, the moderate results of the international undergraduates in terms of culture shock, homesickness or perceived hate; show a set of stress behaviors; such as confusion, anxiety, depression, feelings of alienation and

identity confusion which might be possible problems affecting acculturative stress [16]. The findings of this study are similar to the study conducted by Zhai [17] who found that when international students perceived differences in terms of the educational system, it increases their stress level and significantly affects their early adjustment process. This is in accordance with Berry *et al.* [16] interpretations of acculturation strategies who claim that these strategies affect acculturative stress level and in agreement with Ward and Rana-Deuba [18] who are certain acculturative stress is found to affect the adaptation process of individuals.

This study suggests some mechanisms that UTM should adopt so that international undergraduates enjoy smooth academic progress and a comfortable life as a student in this institution. As a starting point, the roles of different parties in supporting international undergraduates should be emphasized. UTM needs to promote the importance of the international undergraduates' presence in the university campus. Each faculty should track the performance of each international student and intervention programs across cultures for the international undergraduates should be tailor made to reduce their acculturative stress related to their perceived hate. The study also recommends that UTM policy makers provide the international undergraduates not only with psychological but also social and academic counseling. This will minimize the stress associated with adjusting better to the new surroundings and environment reducing their culture shock and homesickness which may lead to poor academic performance. UTM also has the responsibility to involve these students with different activities to reduce the gaps between the local and international students and provide them with suitable teaching and learning methods in order to reduce their fear. Thus, the findings will be useful mainly for the university counseling services, international student office and university academic/non-academic staff. As stated by Bartram [19] and Ramsay *et al.* [20], the support from academic staff is significant in the adjustment process of international students. Subsequently, the three parties should work in collaboration to reduce international undergraduate acculturative stress on campus. College adaptation is related to cultural adaptation and these international undergraduates need help in learning about new culture and UTM counselors need to be aware of their cultural background when they are referred to the counseling center. This is also in agreement with Bektas [21] who believes that international students' office is the first place for international students to ask for any kind of help, information and assistance. Therefore, it is highly recommended that the functions of this office in UTM should be maximized in assisting the international undergraduates adapting to a new environment.

## V. CONCLUSION

Overall, the findings highlight the complex, multifaceted and changing nature of the experience of international undergraduates in a new environment. Despite being in a foreign country with new surroundings, the result of this study suggests that international undergraduates in UTM have moderate overall acculturative stress level. No doubt it is of significance important for the international students to immediately adjust to this environment so as to minimize

potential problems arising. It appears imperative for UTM decision makers to offer special assistance and support services to help reduce the international undergraduates acculturative stress and to promote intercultural interactions and encounters from the very start of their study experience so that their stress should be low. When students have larger and more accessible social networks, they have a sense of steadiness and improvement of self-esteem [22].

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**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).

**Hamidah Abdul Rahman** is a senior lecturer at the Faculty of Management, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Johor Bahru Campus. She obtained her MPhil in Sociology from Universiti Malaya in 1989. She is currently active in research related to Social Science, Integrity and Human Resource Training (Tel: +6075531896; Fax: +6075566911; email: hamidah@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)

**Nur Syazwin Mansor** is a postgraduate student pursuing her Master degree in Statistics from Universiti Teknologi Mara (email: syazwin.mansor@gmail.com)