

International Postgraduates Adaptation Experience

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Abstract—The aim of this study is to investigate college adaptation among international postgraduates in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM) as students are the main customers of higher learning institution and determining their adaptation level can provide valuable insight to this institution. This study was conducted in Semester II 2012/2013 and consisted of 142 international postgraduates from various courses using the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire-SACQ. Data was analyzed using inferential statistical methods including frequency and mean. Results show that academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment and institutional attachment of the international postgraduates at UTM are at moderate level, while social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment and institutional attachment are the three highest adjustments respectively.

Index Terms—Academic adjustment, college adaptation, institutional attachment, personal-emotional.

I. INTRODUCTION

Education plays a big part in the development and advancement of a country. One way or another, the success of this country depends on the accomplishment and the progress of its educational system as it is one of the determining factors in the expansion of the nation economy at the international level. Generally, Malaysia is fast becoming one of the main education attractions among mature students. According to Verbik and Lasanowski [1], Malaysia is the third most important higher education destination in the region. Indirectly, this indicates that the quality of education in Malaysia is being recognized internationally. Most of the postgraduate students who come to Malaysia not only originate from various countries but also come with different education, culture and language backgrounds. Incidentally, these students contribute to the wide variety of cultures available in the country. In relation, these students will face various problems adjusting to the foreign environment being new to the surroundings. One of the main concerns is the pace of adaptation to the new education system which is different from their native country.

They are also expected to get adjusted as quickly as possible to the local culture and irrespective of the native language should be able to communicate with other students and lecturers using a common language that can be understood by both parties. Simultaneously, they also have to adapt fast to living and studying alone as to avoid problems that could affect their concentration which will affect their academic performance. Therefore, adapting to a new

situation for the students is considered crucial. The insinuation is that international students are new to an unfamiliar environment, and it is relatively important for them to adjust as quickly as possible to these new surroundings in order to avoid further complications.

Anderson [2] stated that adaptation is a conscious acknowledgement of difficulties and the identification of strategies to overcome them. She emphasizes that a successful student will manage to learn how to adapt to new life and environment in the institution and this ability will be used as an adaptation techniques which will continue to serve him well for the duration of study at higher learning institutions. Undeniably the first year of university life is one of the most difficulties challenges that international students' face and the purpose of both adjustment and adaptation is to stabilize the students in the new environment [3]. According to Tinto [4] students not only have a variety of education experiences, competences and skills but different values as well as family and community backgrounds before they enter an institution. As much as these individuals and social attributes influence the students' integration into higher education academically and socially, emotional and institution adjustments are additional challenges they need to go through in the new environment. Yi-Fang and Horng-Jyh [5] believe that academic systems are similar across cultures, but not completely identical, which forces international students to change once they enter into a new academic system. The structure of academic disciplines in higher education can be challenging and stressful for those who are new to the environment. This irregularity can be particularly profound for students coming from cultural and language backgrounds totally different from the host country. Therefore, this study tries to investigate the adaptation level of international postgraduates in UTM in order to determine the link between them.

II. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to determine the college adaptation of international postgraduates in UTM. Data were collected during Semester II, 2012/2013, and 142 international postgraduates from various faculties and countries took part in this study. The Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire [6] which consists of 67 items using a 9-point scale of 'applied very closely to me' to 'doesn't apply to me at all' were used as study instrument. The SACQ contains four dimensions of academic, social, personal-emotional and institutional attachments. A pilot study was conducted for reliability and validity with a Cronbach Alpha value of 0.879. The mean value was divided into three levels which were high, moderate and low represented by the range of 6.30-9.00, 3.70-6.29 and 1.00-3.69 respectively.

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

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III. RESULTS

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)	Total Respondents
Academic Adjustment	50	92	0	142
Social Adjustment	31	109	2	142
Personal Emotional Adjustment	30	112	0	142
Institutional Attachment	44	96	2	142

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 II: THE RESPONDENTS OVERALL MEAN BASED ON THE FOUR DIMENSIONS

Dimension	Mean
Social Adjustment	4.30
Personal-Emotional Adjustment	4.30
Institutional Adjustment	4.04
Academic Adjustment	4.03
Overall	4.17

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

TABLE III: THE RESPONDENTS MEAN BASED ON SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

Item	Mean
Involved with social activities in college	5.27
Decision to attend this college in particular	4.93
Satisfied with the extracurricular available in college	4.84
Close social ties in college	4.70

Table III shows the four highest mean for social adjustment items.

TABLE IV: THE RESPONDENTS MEAN BASED ON PERSONAL EMOTIONAL ADJUSTMENT

Item	Mean
Have no thought	5.35
Have put on weight recently	5.20
My thinking does not get mixed up easily	4.44
Experiencing a lot of ease coping with the stresses imposed upon me in college	4.44

Table IV shows the four highest mean for personal emotional adjustment items.

TABLE V: THE RESPONDENTS MEAN BASED ON INSTITUTIONAL ADJUSTMENT

Item	Mean
Feel different from other students at college in ways that I like	4.89
Enjoy living in a college dormitory	4.73
Expect to stay at college for further study	4.68
Satisfied with the number and variety of courses available at college	4.46

Table V shows the four highest mean for institutional adjustment items.

IV. DISCUSSION

From Table II, the result shows that the mean for social adjustment among the international postgraduate is moderate ($m=4.30$). This could possibly be due to the fact that UTM has a large number of international postgraduates from different countries and backgrounds. This could contribute to better social adjustment among the student body since most of them understand what it is like to live in a foreign country; hence, they socialize well with each other as they share a common experience. In addition, Postgraduate Students Society in UTM allows the international postgraduates to have close social ties on campus through involvement with social activities which is reflected in the moderate mean of this study ($m=5.27$, Table III). Even though Barbiker, Cox and Miller [7] believed that cultural distance between culture of international students' origin and the host culture can be a barrier between them, the result of this study proved to be otherwise, since most of them do share close social ties as revealed in the result of this study ($m=4.70$, Table III). In fact, the results also proved that the international postgraduates are satisfied with the extracurricular activity available on campus ($m=4.84$), thus, this does not contribute to much social difference for the international postgraduates in UTM. This is closely related to Humfleet's [8] notion who indicated that students who are socially adjusted are those who have more close friends and spend more time socializing with friends. In fact, these students are not only more likely to maintain friendships over time [9], but they are more likely to regard themselves as having higher quality relationships with other students [10] and being more satisfied with their social life [11].

Results of the study demonstrates that personal-emotional adjustment of the international postgraduates is also moderate ($m=4.30$, Table II). The results validate that the international postgraduates are adjusting well to UTM socially, emotionally and physically the last referring to adjustments to the physical environment, as UTM is located in the tropics. This could be due to the contribution of the surrounding people making things easier, albeit indirectly, for the UTM international postgraduates ability to adapt socially to the new surroundings. Personal adjustment is about how international postgraduates need to maintain their emotions and remain balanced in the face of internal and external stresses encountered in UTM which is facilitated by the process of adaptation and acceptance. The result indicates that the international postgraduates have no thought ($m=5.35$, Table IV) which exhibits their comfort and stability in the new environment. Even though it is customarily assumed that international postgraduates will experience high levels of stress due to the pressures associated with an entirely different cultural or social environment, the result of this study shows that the international postgraduates learn to accept both differences and similarities. As they become more relaxed and confident on campus, they become more familiar with situations in UTM and are able to cope well. Consequently, most of their experiences are enjoyable and they are able to make choices according to their own values

and preferences. These conditions may be the main factors why international postgraduates can adapt well in UTM environment and culture. Despite living in a new setting, they are able to look after their well-being by eating well and many are putting on weight (have put on weight recently, $m=5.20$, Table IV) which is a good sign of adjusting well to different foods and tastes in the new surroundings. It is apparent that their appetite for local food is a possible indicator of their adjustment to the new culture with little or no homesickness. Indeed, they still can manage and care about their health due to the high level of adjustment process (experiencing a lot of ease coping with the stresses imposed upon me in college, $m=4.44$, Table IV). However, the result of this study is not consistent with Sumer, Poryrazli and Grahame [12] who alleged that older students may be more traditional, more resistant to change, and have more difficulties in accepting the host culture's norms and values, therefore, experiencing higher levels of anxiety during their adjustment period.

Results of this study also illustrate institution attachment reveal moderate results among the international postgraduates ($m=4.04$, Table II). The finding indicates that there is a predictable emotional connection between a structure of social order in UTM and the cooperating behaviour of international postgraduates within the UTM community or society. It is a fact that higher learning institutions are built with the purpose of ensuring that students can socialize and express their feelings when they are within the society. Thus the moderate results in this study display that the international postgraduates manage to express or connect their feelings freely either with their friends, or community related to the institution. This could be due to the friendly surrounding, the convenient amenities available and infrastructure provided in UTM that make it easier to adapt well in the environment [13]. In fact the results indicate that the international postgraduates feel different from other students at college in ways that I like ($m=4.89$, Table V). This is in accordance with Berry [14] who argues that the particular acculturation strategy that individuals use might significantly influence the success or failure of their adaptation efforts. Since most international postgraduates in UTM are surrounded with friends either from their own country or other communities, they might have better adjustment skills which resulted in the moderate result of this study. This explains that although they are in a place that is very different from their hometown, the dynamic of high adaptation level contributes to them adjusting to the new environmental challenges. Thus, well-adjusted international students are likely to stay in similar college as institutional attachment does foster loyalty among them (expect to stay at college for further study, $m=4.68$, Table V). The finding of this study is not consistent with Lapsley, Rice and Fitz Gerald [15] who found that students suffer from distress after being away from their family. This is also not in agreement with Tomich, McWhirter and Darcy [16] who consider that the younger the students, the quicker and easier the adjustment process in a foreign country. Thus, the international postgraduates who are considered as older or more mature would be expected to have slight problems adjusting to UTM which is totally the opposite as revealed in this study.

V. FUTURE STUDY

In this study, the researcher investigates college adaptation among international postgraduates in Universiti Teknologi Malaysia only. It is recommended that future study be conducted in all higher learning institutions in Malaysia to verify this result.

VI. CONCLUSION

In summary, providing an environment to assist international postgraduates in making a successful adjustment is an important issue that requires further attention from UTM authorities. It is essential that UTM administrators and academics work to retain the open system of communication embraced in UTM where everyone is allowed to express their views which serves to openly identify areas of improvement and to enhance the institution's standard which aims at providing effective support to the international postgraduates. This study provides insightful information and guidance for various support departments and relevant bodies to provide for a more effective support system in searching for successful methods either academically or socially to help international postgraduates enhance their adjustment to UTM.

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

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