

STUDYING ABROAD: MALAY STUDENTS ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE UK EDUCATION SYSTEM AND PERSONAL ADJUSTMENT

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ABSTRACT:The Malaysian government is concerned about the significance of studying abroad and has therefore been very active in sending students abroad to study. Malaysia has an elaborate foreign scholarship program which sees 10,000 or more students relocate abroad annually and the majority of them are Malays or *Bumiputera*. Studying abroad is seen as a backbone to produce a potential citizen that functions effectively in society and plays a role in economic and national development. This paper provides an analysis of Malay undergraduate students' narratives of their perceptions and attitudes towards studying abroad and the UK's education system. The purpose of this paper is to investigate, share and understand their process of adjustment and adaptation as well as the challenges they encounter while abroad. The findings support the previous literature that studying abroad has a significant impact on the students' life experience. The problems students encountered as being of three general types: socio-cultural adjustments; language issues; and learning and teaching approach. It is argued here that these experiences and problems, along with other aspects of their previous education system, interaction with the locals/ host national, religion, culture and language, had an influence on their attitudes towards study in the UK.

KEYWORDS: Malay Students, Study abroad, UK Education System, Personal Adjustment

INTRODUCTION

Studying abroad is defined as an educational program that takes place outside the student's country of origin (Kitsantas and Meyers, 2001). This paper provides an analysis of Malay undergraduate students' narratives of their perceptions and attitudes towards studying abroad and the UK's education system. The purpose of this paper is to investigate, share and understand their process of adjustment and adaptation as well as the challenges they encounter while abroad. The paper compares the students' experiences of education in Malaysia and in the UK, considering the changing outlook of both education systems. Issues of adaptation, transition and personal change when presented with the new environment are also outlined in this paper. Overall, this paper offers an in-depth discussion of the students' experiences after being in the UK and the significant transition that they undergo after a period of time in this foreign country. Indeed, what would study abroad and education in the UK look like from the student's perspective? How do they deal and adjust to the challenges presented by different educational systems, a new environment and an unfamiliar culture?

2.0 METHOD

Qualitative research was undertaken in order to explore, understand, interpret, and compare perceptions, attitudes and experiences of two different categories of Malay students; first and final year students at two universities in the UK. The sample of respondents in this study consists of sixteen Malay undergraduate students (eight respondents from each university). The length of time or period of study in the UK is the main reason why the first and final year undergraduate students have been chosen to participate in this study. While maintaining a gender balance was a primary concern in this sampling method. These students basically represent an elite student group who excelled academically and who can be considered to be 'future leaders' in the country.

3.0 FINDINGS

3.1 Attitude towards UK education system

After going through a process of social and cultural adaptation to a new education system in the UK, the students had apparently experienced not only different social settings but also 'culture shock'. According to Ryan and Twibell (2000), nearly all study abroad participants will experience culture shock to some degree as the new environment is socially, psychologically and culturally different to what they are used to. In order to gauge how they dealt with 'culture shock', this section discusses the factors which had the most impact on the students' views and attitudes during their studies.

a) The different nature of the education system

Based on the findings, the students expressed strongly that the differences in study methods compared to what they were used to in their home country presented the biggest challenge in the learning process. Much has been said and written about the differences between the teaching and learning approaches in Southeast Asia and Western countries (Cortazzi and Jin, 1997; Pratt et al, 1999). In many Asian countries (including Malaysia), students spend a much greater amount of time in class and there is less emphasis on independent study, with most of the information being provided by lecturers or teachers in their sessions (Bamford, 2008:4). On the contrary, the teaching and learning method in the UK requires students to be able to do their own research to increase their subject knowledge and skills as well as developing the ability to synthesize information critically (Wenger, 1998; Bamford, 2008). Evidently, the students need to cope with this new approach that they find difficult to adapt to. Some typical comments such as 'need to be critical', 'self-study' and 'less guidance' became a stigma. These reflections indicate that a sense of dependence on the lecturers remains a crucial part of their study.

Hence, many respondents who were still tied to their old culture of learning demonstrated dissatisfaction towards the reduced information and guidance they were given, particularly regarding the examinations they were working towards. An example of this can be seen from the interview with Izati (first year female student) who felt there were clear cultural differences in how to deal with examinations. She said: "I don't know what to expect with the studies, especially during exams. Nobody I asked knows either. It's weird. Back home we had more discussion about what will come out in exams". This claim supports the view that "Asian students have difficulty in adjustment to an educational environment that was more characterized by independent learning and less instruction, supervision and guidance" (Smith and Smith, 1999:66). At this point, the research found that more guidance seemed to be crucially important to many Malaysian students, mainly the freshers, since they were unfamiliar with the new education system. The need for guidance with study skills and even such things as referencing, taking notes or writing up log books was pointed out by the students who need to have their learning development put into consideration.

For some students whose previous learning experience was quite intense with a busy schedule of classes in their home country felt very happy with this system. Four of the respondents said that more free time in their study made them feel more relaxed and less pressured. Furthermore, the carefree education system also

gives students the opportunity to get involved with other social activities or spend time on personal things. Zahidi (Male final year student) responded to the interview question by saying:

I feel integrated into society, participating in volunteer jobs or doing outdoor activities. Back home you don't have much time to do these kind of things because there are too many classes, assignments and exams to work towards.

The UK education system evidently gives lot of opportunity for university students to have more personal time and to decide what is best for their studies and future life. It seems that those who are enthusiastic to achieve highly in education will give full effort in their studies. On the other hand, those who waste too much of their free time will lose sight of the fundamental objective: to perform better in education. Xiao, Halstead and Lin (2011:7) argue that the level of achievement of students in the UK's individualistic approach "almost solely depends on their determination and endeavor". As a different perspective, the UK education approach does indeed allow the students to have some excellent experiences. Several students explained that they have gained new skills by developing ideas in tutorials, discussions, group tasks and presentations. Three of them, mainly final year students, reported that they experienced an exciting moment when they could express ideas in front of the class with other students appreciating them. Hakim (Male final year student) viewed this as a valued aspect of his academic experience and he told me: "I find that it's a great feeling when people take you seriously when at first they looked down on you. It's proof that Malaysians are not stupid". He felt this way due to an impressive performance in his first semester when he attained the highest marks in his group and was asked for help from other students, including the locals. Obviously, Hakim's statement implies that Malaysians abroad act as 'representatives' (Osler, 1998) of Malaysia, where any achievement they gain will reflect the image and perception of their home country.

b) Lecturers' / tutors' attitudes

Overall, the majority of the students in the study were positive about the support received from their lecturers or tutors. On reflection about what she enjoyed most in her studies, Zaiton (Female final year student) valued the friendly and encouraging lecturers who help her motivation. She portrayed her views in this quotation:

At the beginning, I didn't really like my course but it slowly changed when the lecturer gave more support and encouraged us to participate in class. They never made us feel inferior or offended us when we were wrong, and in fact motivated us and encouraged us to do better.

What seems clear from the quotation is that, even though the method of education is quite new to them, psychological and emotional aspects still play an important role in motivating them. As international students, the respondents need more guidance and moral support to ensure they can engage well in the study.

Nevertheless, on being asked what they thought about their relationship with or the approachability of the lecturers there was not much enthusiasm expressed. Of the 8 respondents, 5 of them, being final year students, spoke about having difficulty in meeting their lecturers since most of them were too busy. They regarded this situation as the least enjoyable part in their studying experience. The students expanded on their statements by saying that there was not much one to one contact with the lecturers; that they preferred to be contacted via email and asked students to book an appointment in advance. This contrasts with what they had experienced in Malaysia, where the student and lecturer relationship was said to be much closer and face to face discussion was an important part of this. The criticism of the lack of contact with lecturers was illustrated in the Hanif (Male final year student) view:

Not all the lecturers here are good (laughing). At the engineering department the lecturers are quite busy. Most of them will ask us to send an email and book an appointment but I prefer to go and see them face to face because in discussion you can have and understand more.

Similar claims can be seen from the Chinese students from China who were used to the nature of 'closeness of teacher-student relationships' in their country (Bailey, 2005: 7). According to Bailey, most of the Chinese students in the UK express difficulty in understanding the concept of 'specified office hours or the need for an appointments system' (Bailey, 2005: 7), especially when they can see their lecturer is in the office but unavailable. These feelings towards the lecturers and tutors can also be seen from the Malay students. They reported that they had concerns about the relationships with their lecturers, especially the local staff, who they regard as being biased towards the international students. They claimed that a small but nevertheless substantial number of lecturers were less supportive and did not encourage positive environments during their learning sessions. Fahmi, (Male first year student) for example, claimed that he feels a distance when meeting with the local lecturers, saying:

There's some kind of bias between international and local students. They don't really pay attention to you or will give an unpleasant reaction when you ask them something. However, they seem very welcoming to the local students. For that reason, I feel much more comfortable with the international lecturers.

While the majority of students generally perceived the lecturers' or tutors' support to be positive, it can be assumed that this distancing much depends on the individual lecturer's or tutor's characteristics and it is perhaps a rather rare occurrence. However, as both of the situations above are regarded as somewhat 'negative' aspects of the UK's education by the students, they indicate the need to take into consideration the cultural differences and their impact on students' satisfaction.

c) Language Issues

As far as the cultural difference and its impact on students' satisfaction is concerned, the expectation of contributing in class has being perceived as a traumatic experience for many of students, specifically at the start of their studies. The majority of students in the study stressed that as non-native speakers of English are likely to be incompatible with what lecturers/tutors expected. Thus, they were too shy to express the difficulties that they were having, as some of them assumed it would be seen as a weakness or they would feel 'unintelligent' and that could give lecturers a bad impression of their ability. The pressure increased when the lecturers or tutors did not have much concern for the difference in international background (for instance, they did not take different language, culture and previous education format) during the class session. Haziq (Male first year student) showed a sense of discontented feeling about the way the lecturer treated him and expressed his views as:

The lecturer assumed that we would have the same ability as local students. But we Malaysians have to work harder compared to the British because they have been taught to study in that manner, which they can understand easily and engage in critical thinking. However, we Malaysians used to just memorise and get our grade. So, in that sense it was very hard for us to cope with this learning style.

The phrases 'understand easily' and 'to engage in critical thinking' is assumed to have some connection to the student's ability in the English language. As English is not his first language, it might lead to difficulties in analysing information and expressing ideas. The findings demonstrated that the student's international background should be taken into consideration in lecturers/tutors teaching approaches. These findings are in line with Xiao, Halstead and Lin's (2011:8) study on Chinese students experience in the UK, who suggest that the university and staff should acknowledge that Chinese students (it could be extended to other international students, in particular Asian students) socio-cultural background and learning experience is far different from the West. Hence, a supportive environment is essential, particularly in their initial stage at university. However, there was a contrast in the degree to which different students deal with the different approach of learning. In this respect, several students illustrated that this kind of method does not give them many problems; instead, it gives them the opportunity to learn how to express their opinion and build ideas through discussion. Dali, (Male first year student) who was very talkative student and used English as his medium of speaking, said:

I find studying here is quite good. The education system is focused more on independent study, more freedom and having a lot more space to give your own thought. We are becoming more critical in which I'm not really used to do when I was in Malaysia.

Based on the discussions above, it could be argued that proficiency in the English language is the main barrier in adapting to the new system in the UK. This finding is consistent with what Swami (2008) found in his study of predictors of socio-cultural adjustment among sojourning Malaysian students in Britain. Based on his questionnaire results, the Chinese participants reported a significantly higher proficiency in English than did Malay students. Thus, he confirmed that proficiency in the host culture's primary language was a very strong predictor of socio-cultural adjustment for both Malays and Chinese (Swami, 2008:1).

d) Facilities and resources

One of the main reasons Malaysian students chose to study in the UK was because it has good resources and facilities. Haziq, (Male first year student) who already had spent eight months in University A, gave his impression on this matter: "In regard to the facilities, I felt that it would be better but it is better than I thought. Most things are provided. If you need anything in engineering, you just apply and they will buy it for you". In contrast, three of the interviewees in University B who took chemistry and biology courses revealed that they were quite disappointed with the lab equipment and facilities. Asrul (Male first year student) described how it was quite difficult to use only one apparatus and have to wash it for another experiment. He expressed this by saying:

I kind of had such a high perception of the UK learning system. But I was quite disappointed with some parts of it, like when doing lab work. We have a lack of apparatus and equipment to do experiments. I used to have a complete and new apparatus in our country but here those apparatus that they provided were minimum and in an old condition.

Related to this, Fauziah (Female first year student) has tried to justify the situation even though she is in the same course with Asrul.

Back home, most of the equipment is not really optimised by the students, rather, the lecturers gave an explanation and did the experiments. But here, even though we have limited equipment, we try to maximise its usefulness. It teaches us to be more patient and more passionate in our task.

At this point, given the circumstantial evidence, it seems that the facilities that were provided depended on the course taken and the host university itself. Overall, the experiences from these students suggests that unfamiliarity with the UK academic format and a lack of confidence in their English ability, has caused some considerable discomfort during their studies at university. Nevertheless, these unpleasant feelings were compensated when many of the lecturers/tutor were able to create a positive environment of learning through their support and encouraging attitudes, as well as good facilities and resources.

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The students perceived a varied pattern of academic performance which can be traced from their end results. Roughly, there were two notable result patterns presented in students' academic achievement: improved and drop patterns. Academic improvement can be observed largely from first year students and in this study, three respondents achieved their target. The Malays students who excelled in their academic performance embraced the useful approaches carried out by their department, such as regular tutorial, personal tutors and study groups, which they felt were more helpful.

Contrary to the first year students' results, the data revealed that the majority of the students that fell into the 'drop pattern' tended to be final year students. Around five out of eight respondents admitted that their final results were not so impressive and had rather dropped each year. They seemed to have common reasons for the dropping factor, which can be concluded as 'final year syndrome', and there are a number of explanations for this. In comparison to the early years of their study, the content of the course undertaken had been getting harder to deal with. In addition, the nature of study in the UK, which emphasises self-learning, appeared to present a considerable challenge for the students in terms of adjustment and effective learning. Moreover, the differences of approach in addressing assessment or examinations, the lack of practical skills, limited class contact time and discussion, created tensions that affected the students' performance. These situations can be classified as 'academic culture shock' (Gilbert, 2000 cited in Li, Chen and Duanmu, 2010: 314) that create tensions that affect a student's performance. Hakim (Male final year student) confirmed this by saying:

My result was getting worse from the first year until now. I think probably our students are having culture shock with the UK system, which is quite different to what has been practised in Malaysia in its focus on exams. And one more thing, the UK system puts a greater emphasis on the practical and less on the theoretical compared to our home country's system. We couldn't compete with the locals who were really good in that: that's why I think our students results drop over the years. But, they can score better in exam.

Secondly, there were too many 'distractions' in the UK that led to the respondents in the current study drifting away from focusing on their studies. The carefree study which related to fewer classes to be fulfilled had exerted powerful influence on students to fill the gap with other activities.

Several students who have received the government scholarship award reaffirmed the above perspective. For instance Asmida (Female final year student) added: "maybe because we are too comfortable with the easy life, the scholarship and not having many classes that it made us not really give full effort in our study". However, in relation to society activities, some students were not really bothered with their dropping performance. Instead, they regarded their involvement in the Malaysian society and co-curriculum as giving them added value, developing skills such as leadership and communication. Indeed, in their view, formal education is not the only way to succeed in life; they placed more importance on the interaction and contribution to society. One question that arises is whether this kind of attitude is an 'opportunity' or 'vulnerability' for students after graduation seemed need to be observed.

CHANGES IN THE PERCEPTIONS OF MALAYSIAN AND UK EDUCATION

This section provides an insight into the Malay students' perceptions of their educational experiences in the UK, and the extent to which their outlook towards the Malaysian and UK education system changed. In seeing the education system of both the UK and Malaysia through the eyes of these undergraduate students, a number of significant differences were revealed. Given that these students were mostly school leavers and had not undertaken studies at a university level in their home country, it is recommended that the findings need to be seen as broadly indicative rather than conclusive.

Most of the students in the study mentioned that the method of teaching in the UK, which demanded more independent study and critical thinking, changed their outlook upon education in Malaysia. In contrast to the UK format, they demonstrated that Malaysia's teaching approach appears to be more didactic, where the information is delivered through an instructive approach with a lot of class contact time. In this respect, a majority of respondents saw the Malaysian education approach as exam oriented and 'spoon feeding'. The main emphasis of this approach being that all the information presented in classrooms was supplied for the student to learn for the exam (Desley, 2002: 293

Izati(Female first year student) stressed: "we have a series of assignments, we have midterm exams, final exams and everything is on an exam basis. There were too many classes and this had limited our time to be

involved in societies and other issues". This spoon feeding approach tallies to some extent with the tradition of Asian students who are more familiar with the 'listen and obey culture' (Littlewood, 2000). Nevertheless, it was demonstrated earlier that a considerable number of the students enjoyed learning in the new educational approach, where they had the opportunity to express their ideas and building opinions in the classes undertaken. Clearly, the Malay students do not in fact wish to be spoon fed with information from the tutors or lecturers. Rather, they want to explore knowledge themselves and reach self-satisfaction in the learning process. As Dali (Male first year student) said, "doing your own research which emphasises gathering resources, referencing and reciting, helps me to understand better and gives me more satisfaction". Far beyond this, it shows that culture influences behaviour and learning styles in systematic manners. Therefore, it is argued that the respondents' experiences and attitudes towards the UK education system were in part influenced by the nature of the education system in their home country.

More than half of the students regarded the UK approach as harder, yet more valuable. They recognised that it gives them the opportunity to improve their analysing capability and prepared them to be competitive in the society, which is something 'lacking' in Malaysia. Overall, perhaps the clear picture of UK education system could be envisaged by Fauziah(Female first year student) idea:

Back in Malaysia, we were taught to memorise and just accept whatever is given, but here it is like multi-tasking: learning is more wider and not just focused on the text book like back home. You need to do your own research, online learning, to engage in critical thinking, and explore the things that are outside what the lecturers teach. There is a lot of self-study I think and it is a lot to do with your own effort and commitment...and self-initiative which is better, because it helps you to survive in the world.

It is also noteworthy to point out that some students reckoned that the gap between the UK and Malaysia education system was relatively small. The only difference was the way the curriculum is being taught, but for other aspects it almost the same. The fact that Malaysia is a new country compared to the UK that has undergone hundreds of year of educational development has been identified as the main reason this country still needs a lot of improvement. This incomparable situation became apparent when five out of sixteen students refused to give a firm judgment about this topic. They prefer to avoid giving a comparison of both systems because of the different levels of education that they have undergone before. Fahmi(First year male student) answered:

No. I can't really compare [the UK system] to the Malaysian education system because I have never been to a local university. I don't know how a university in Malaysia works. Whatever I have compared is just like secondary school. It's not really fair to compare it.

The above discussions show that there are some differences between Malaysia and the UK education system. On one side, the Malaysian education seems 'insufficient' to improve students' ability to be more analytical and critical like the UK system does. On the other side, this 'lacking' method could be justified by the country background that Malaysia is in its 'transition' stage from a colonial country to become a develop country. Hence, arguably there are a lot of improvements in the making.

ENVIRONMENT, ADAPTATION AND PERSONAL CHANGE

Considering each student has brought a unique experience to share, several overlying themes regarding adaptation and personal change during their stay in the UK became evident throughout the process of gathering information.

a) Language and culture

- i- Language Preference and English Proficiency

A general perception among the Malay students is that the most effective way to become proficient in the English language is to study abroad. Students who spend a considerable period of time abroad would have frequent and intense opportunities to interact with native speakers and to activate their linguistic ability that help to make them proficient (Pelligrino, 1998: 91). Perhaps, the participants in this research could provide the factual answer for this assumption. The results show that there was less significant in English Language acquisition emerged between all participants regardless of their level of study. Accommodation and socialisation was found to be the main factors that influenced language preference for the students which effected communicative competence. The data revealed that the students who were living with other international students were more competent in their English language than those who chose to be isolated with their own group. Obviously, more Malay students preferred to stay, socialise and interact with their own society and communicate less with others, thus, English language was only practically used in university surroundings. It implies that the English language was only been used for certain purposes, for instance in the class rooms or when they encountered non-Malays. Ismawati (First year female student), for example, was asked what language she frequently used in the UK and she answered: "most of the time I speak Malay, about 60%, and only 40% English. Usually, I speak English at university". While Zahidi (final year male student), who has lived with his Malay group since the first year of study, added "I associate too much with Malays, so I merely speak Malay language. It's weird to speak English with Malay".

However, some Malay students were fluent in the English language due to their background advantage of living in an urban society, family inclination to using English and had been socialised with multiple races in Malaysia; and of course living with the locals and international students in the UK. The results are similar to Swami's (2008) findings which demonstrated that Malay participants' experienced poorer English Language proficiency in comparison with their Chinese counterparts due to the Malay students having less contact with co-nationals and host nationals.

Referring to international students as a whole, being unaccustomed to the formal English language usually affects the process of adaptation in the new environment (Houghton & Dickinson, 1992; Bailey, 2005; Bamford, 2008). This was the same for the Malay students who participated in this study, where adjustment and adaptation to the life and study in the UK was not easy for them. It became more complicated to deal with an unfamiliar accent, which affected their ability to understand and contribute in class discussions. They have also struggled more on clarifying the accent of the non-British. As a consequence, those students felt inferior and intimidated to participate and express ideas in the class or group discussion. Far more serious, writing in a foreign language became the most difficult part in their study experience. Erma (Final year female student) explained: "it's quite hard to master a foreign language, especially in writing. We have to listen, read, using a dictionary, understand, clarify and then we write on the paper. It takes time".

Taking into account the effects of learning and using the English Language in their daily utterance, not all of the students achieved an excellent competency in this language. Still, a significant number could prove the proficiency, which enhanced their confidence level and improved the effectiveness of communication. Ten respondents said their English language proficiency had improved a lot since getting involved with group discussion and participating in class presentation. Nevertheless, it needs to be stressed that the improvement mainly manifested in oral or speaking parts, but not in writing skills. Some of them stated that their competency in speaking was similar as it was previously, but they had started picking up the accent. When speaking about this, Amalina (First year female student) told me that she felt confident to talk to the locals and participate in the discussion:

My English language improves, although not to a high standard, but I feel more confident to communicate with other people. It also helps a lot in my study. Now I try to learn their accent so that they can understand me better.

The data also found that some of the final year participants had not significantly improved their proficiency in English language after been more than three years in the UK. They have pointed to the lack of socialisation with the native speakers rather than sticking to their own society as the major factor that influenced their less English competency. Zahidi (Final year male student) admitted this flaw: "Not much, I think (laughing). Since I'm mingling around with too many mates from Malaysia, so I don't feel like I've improved a lot". The factor that is pointed out by Swami (2008) is that those who have less contact with host national are having a poorer grasp of English, and this research has confirmed this finding.

ii- Culture and lifestyle

Leaving home country and facing unfamiliar communities, values, traditions and life-style in the 'new home' were perceived as a little strange to the most of the respondents in the study. Consequently, this uncommon feeling had led students to find ways to maintain their cultural tradition even while trying to adapt to the new environment setting. Sharma and Jung (1984:20) view education abroad or international education as a "socialization process through which one person becomes informed about another's culture while remaining conscious of his own essential identity". The Malay students in study still make effort to preserve and reinforce Malay culture in their daily life while in the UK, for instance wearing traditional dress such as the 'baju kurung/ baju Melayu', serving Malay dishes, saying 'salam' when meeting each other, and taking shoes off when entering the house. Furthermore, some regards using their mother tongue on a regular basis as protecting the heritage as well. Statements on this most frequently include: "I'm still wearing 'baju kurung/baju Melayu' to class"; "I can't live without eating Malay food"; and "we will celebrate Eid and other Islamic festival without fail".

It is important to note that, Islam took a central place in Malay students narratives in which they associated it as 'the way of life'. Zaiton (Final year female student) explained: "No matter where we go, no matter what culture we are facing, we stick to Islam, and follow Islamic thought because Islam is not culture; Islam is a way of life".

In terms of food, the majority of them reported that they preferred to cook Malaysian food in their daily life, since English cuisine did not really fit their taste. Regarding the way of dressing, all students agreed that they will dress according to the seasons in the UK, such as wearing a 'hoody' or winter coat because it was more practical instead of wearing the same dress as in Malaysia. This allowed some of them to try to apply an English style of dressing, as they thought it was more fashionable and it helped them blend in. Even so, preserving identity as Malays was more important to them, as Amalina (First year student) said:

I think, I'm still very Malay, even here. It's just that you have to adapt with the environment, like wearing winter coat, or a 'hoody'. We don't really wear the way they do. Obviously we keep to our oriental culture.

Erma(Final year female student) echoed this view by pointing questions:

Why do we need to sacrifice what we already have to wear something new? Why should I change to another style, like colouring my hair or wearing it like them? It's not necessary I think. You can be like them but not literally like them.

With this evidence, it suggested that the Malay students had made substantial efforts to preserve and retain their culture and identity, yet were open to experience a new process of adaptation and adjustment during their interaction with the different surroundings in the UK.

iii- Local culture adaptation and adjustment

The concept of adaptation and adjustment being used interchangeably, where both concepts bring about the transformation or changes towards individual or groups of people (Dziubacka and Grincevičienė, 2010). The Malay students in this study had experienced the process of adaptation and adjustment during their interaction with the new environment in the UK. Nevertheless, their response and capability to cope with the

local culture varies at an individual level. Some students can operate effectively and confidently, but some need more time to adapt and many choose to be apart from certain values that they perceive inappropriate to them. Three of them made a comparison with how their prior expectation of the UK differed from how they found it to be on their arrival here. Ismawati (First year female student), for example, had envisaged the people in the UK in a very positive light and seemed to have placed this in a dichotomy with some of the negative experiences she had gone through. She spoke of the isolation that she felt as a foreigner, even though her initial intention was trying to mix around with the local students.

I expected that local people to be welcoming to new international students, but I was wrong. They seemed to treat you as a foreigner who doesn't know how to speak English. They tend to ignore or be apart from you.

Ruzman (Final year male student) also made a comparison about the British attitude in which he perceived the British as quite arrogant and have their own pride over other races; this was in contrast to how Americans treated foreigners. He put his thought about this as:

We are not locals and we are not European either, so we have to approach them in the first step in order to mix around with them. They normally stereotype us as a lower class or second standard students who come from third world country. This is in comparison to the US where their people are more open in accepting international students.

Many respondents mentioned that most of the local students already have their own colleagues and that contributes to the reason of new international students finding it hard to associate with them. Hanif (Final year male student), who came to UK in his second year of study, talked about his difficulty in making friends with the locals even after almost half a year of been in the UK.

One thing I realised about the locals is they are friendly but they are not friendly to new comers. It's quite hard to make friends with them at the beginning. They don't talk to you if you don't initiate a conversation. Like my class mate, I didn't know them for the first half of the year because they didn't come and talk to me until I had labs, did things together and try to know them, be nice to them, then they will become friendly.

Hanif's experience tallies with Osler (1998:80) study on exchange students program in the European countries that over a third from 37 participants expressed difficulties in integrating with British students. She gave an example of students from French and German who "felt excluded from social interactions with British students because their own habits and expectations were different". This perspective suggests that the locals' culture and values in socialising to some extent are unfitted with other societies. Nevertheless, although the British people are very reserved on first acquaintance, apparently this barrier can be overcome (Osler, 1998). The interview with Dali (First year male student), who regarded his flat mates who were locals as his best friends, provided a more positive example of inter-racial friendship experience. He explained: "Before you get to know them, maybe you feel like at distance but once you spent long time with them you feel that they are no different from Malaysians. They can be really good friends".

Apparently, despite this 'alien' attitude of the locals to the students, the majority of the respondents, regardless of their background, acknowledged several attributes of the local culture and tried to integrate them into their life. The selected qualities that were normally adapted by the students were being more polite to other people, saying thank you, punctuality and practicing queuing in the public. Ismawati (First year female student), for example, reflected on the manner that she had adapted: "If I go back to Malaysia now, I would definitely be more polite and appreciate other's feelings better". Interestingly, in order to make friends with the locals some of the first year students had tried to join them to the club or pub but without taking any drinks. Dali, who was living with the locals and international students' friends, made this statement: "If you need to adapt to them, you need to be like them. The initiative should come from you. As long as you know the limit as a Muslim it should be fine". It seemed Fahmi did not agree with this statement, even though he also had experience in the same condition; he gave his comment: "I had tried once but I think it's not appropriate for a Muslim to go to a place like that and being surrounding with drinks and quite wild activities". For the

majority of the Malay students, their desire to maximize interaction with the locals brings new forms of conflict into their lives. They have been in a dilemma to protect their belief and culture or compromise it with the new environment. Perhaps a view from Zahidi (Final year male student) could represent this conflict:

I have tried to adapt with the local as best as I could but there is not much I can do because of religion and culture. We want to assimilate in the society but at the same time we want to preserve our identity. I don't feel that I'm belonging to that group. It's so hard to manage it.

The results support the argument made in the literature which state that differences in values between sojourners and the host country are responsible for adjustment difficulties in socio-cultural adaptation (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Swami, 2008). Differing values in their religion, culture and system is seen to 'clash' with British culture. Thus, these students noticeably have faced difficulty to tolerate this situation. On the whole, the finding suggests that most Malays students adapted well with the environment and students life in the universities. Unfortunately, some elements of Western culture, such as drinking and clubbing activities, were seen as not applicable and not appropriate to their religion, values and Eastern tradition.

b) Transition and Personal Growth

The experiences of studying abroad for the students in this current study bring a significant transitional chapter in their life, even though that transition is interwoven with stress and the coping process of unfamiliar physical and psychological changes. Spending time away from their home culture and the combination of psychological encouragement from the lecturer/tutors and their own society, as well as independent approach in academic process, gave the students an opportunity to reflect on their beliefs, values, personality, and life in general. After all, these could be harmonised in the concept of personal growth. Many different responses were noted, with the student reporting everything from learning about themselves to learning about the other culture. Asmida and Hanif both final year students discussed how their experiences studying abroad gave them a sense of self-respect and independence. "It made me more independent," explained Asmida. Hanif echoed similar sentiments: "Basically I learn to be more independent and to take care of myself. I had learned to push myself to succeed in things I want to achieve".

A majority of the participating students reported that their experience studying abroad had also instilled a new-found confidence in themselves and their abilities. A sense of being on the same par with their local peers in terms of studying ability was noticeably growing in four students. The inferior feeling that they had struggled with before almost disappeared and they began to build personal confidence when facing others. Fauziah (First year female student) expressed her feelings:

Before I came here, I felt quite inferior to compete with the locals here, however, after almost six months being here, I realised that we are at the same level - even much better than them. They might be better in voicing their ideas and quite proactive, whereas we used to accept what were given. We are just not used to their style.

This feeling of gaining some level of increased confidence not only blossomed in their academic performance but also covered a variety of sensations, from feeling more expressive, having higher self-esteem and a capability to become the person who would stand up for their own opinion. This finding did not significantly differ from what Wallace (1993:13) notes as the outcomes from educational abroad experiences include "an increased self-confidence, a deeper awareness of one's own strengths and weaknesses, and a heightened knowledge of effective approaches to other human beings". Wallace asserts that all of these changes "come from having functioned successfully in a strange environment and under a different set of ground rules from those found in one's own culture" (1993:13). The narratives of the interviews illustrated that sense of confidence derived from a number of reasons in the students' experiences. Some of them mentioned that their confidence level increased because "people here are more confident, I think. So I need to be more confident even though at first I felt quite inferior (Ismawati (first year female student)), "they [the local students] are really brave to ask questions, no matter if it is right or wrong. In that sense, it changed my mind-

set to take a stand on my own opinion" (Fatin). At this point, 'to take a stand' is featured by the students who had an ability to argue with other ideas and not just accept whatever was given, as they were used to. It seemed that the tradition of 'listen and obey' had drifted away from these students instead; critical and analytical thinking, as well as making argumentation, had taken place.

Class presentation and group discussion seemed to be another factor that developed the confidence level among students. This includes the improvement in communication skills, public speaking and being proactive. Students reported that their introvert, nervous and inferior feelings when speaking in public began to disappear after adapting to regular presentations in class rooms. At the beginning, Zaiton (Final year female student) felt too shy to express her opinion in public because she used to be concerned about what other people might think about her when talking, spoke about her changed attitude:

I used to be very quiet, not really saying much but when I'm here I learn to talk a lot. I think what I find with myself is probably better confidence, talking to the public like presentations boosted my confidence.

Another impact of studying abroad noted by the students was a perceived maturation. Asrul (First year male student) was surer of the extent to which studying abroad impacted on his maturity level. He details his views:

What I found here personally is what I thought about the purpose of study itself. It's about why you want to have the knowledge. Then, you want to spread the knowledge and you can apply the knowledge. So, if let's say the purpose of study is not that, you still can get what you want, like you want to study because you want to pass in exams or to have a good job, or to be recognised as a successful man in your career. But is that all? To me, to gain something only for yourself or to be praised by people is nothing much. More important is to give a contribution to others. That's your prior task. Yes..I think I'm more mature now compared to three years ago.

Such views, according to Juhasz and Walker (1998), highlight the growth and maturation process that assists individuals with viewing themselves more objectively. Continuing the trend, for a few of the students, studying abroad led to some life changes but also allowed them to reaffirm some of the beliefs or faith they already held. Fatin's (Final year female student) time abroad allowed her to reflect on her religious understandings and arrive at a more personal awareness of her own beliefs. She described this by saying:

I'm on my own here and you cannot help that one day you will live on your own, you will not be controlled by anyone except by what you believe in. If you believe in God, then all that sort of thing will be controlled by what you believe.

In addition to impacting on some students' behaviours, tolerance and self-discovery and an increased sense of open mindedness also took place in their narratives. Many students noted their study abroad experience definitely had a positive impact on the way they understand, perceived, reacted to, and treated people from different cultures. The data echoes Thomlison's (1991:27) findings which indicated that studying abroad increase international awareness and open-mindedness by enhancing the capacity to accept different views, attitudes, values and life-styles, as well as reduce stereotypes. The positive results that have been given above have not, however, applied to all. Some respondents particularly, the first year students, did not notice much different from what they were before, as they described the learning process was still continuing. Based on the perceptions and experiences of the students above, there is no doubt that studying abroad, regardless level of study, gender or personal background contributes to a change in personality, world view and spiritual enhancement of the Malay students.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this chapter demonstrates a number of issues that are important to the Malay students' experience of studying at University A and University B, which could perhaps be generalised to all

universities in the UK. The current study supports the previous literature that studying abroad has a significant impact on the students' life experience. Nevertheless, the majority of the students, did not have genuine knowledge and proper preparation for the 'strangeness' that they were about to face until they arrived and experience the new environment (Xiao, Halstead and Lin, 2011:9). Therefore, being unaccustomed to the new setting had caused many problems and difficulties for these students. It is observed from the research that the problems students encountered as being of three general types: socio-cultural adjustments; language issues; and learning and teaching approach. It is argued here that these experiences and problems, along with other aspects of their previous education system, interaction with the locals/ host national, religion, culture and language, had an influence on their attitudes towards study in the UK. There were also several outcomes found from the students' experiences of being in the UK. The students seemed to idealise the UK system, criticise their own country's system and tend to 'adopt' the host culture's values in their daily life. From all of the evidence given, this study reveals that being exposed to another culture and to different ways of thinking not only leads the students to the new understanding of defining their own identity, but this exposure also influences their attitudes towards the home country.

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