



Exploring Challenges and Coping Strategies for Mental Well-Being among International Students in Malaysia

Sara Salah Ahmed Mahmoud Elheneidy & Zhooriyati Sehu Mohamad*

School of Psychology, Asia Pacific University of Technology and Innovation, 57000 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

ABSTRACT

International student mobility in higher education plays a crucial role in the global academic landscape, with cultural adaptation being a key challenge. In Malaysia, this process involves adjusting to new educational systems, navigating cultural differences, and managing psychological and financial stressors that impact mental well-being. Language barriers hinder effective communication, while cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and culture shock, contributing to anxiety, loneliness, and isolation. This study explores these challenges, and the coping mechanisms students employ using a qualitative, phenomenological approach through semi-structured interviews with five purposefully selected undergraduate students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The findings reveal that international students struggle with issues related to food, festivals, clothing, discrimination, and language barriers. To maintain their well-being, they engage in extracurricular activities, build supportive friendships, seek counselling, and develop resilience and self-reliance, fostering personal growth. The study recommends that universities strengthen support for international students by enhancing orientation programmes, fostering cross-cultural interactions, expanding student services, and providing counselling in students' native languages to facilitate adaptation and overall well-being.

Keywords: international students, cultural adaptation, language barriers, mental well-being, coping strategies

ARTICLE INFO

Email address: zhooriyati.sehu@apu.edu.my (Zhooriyati Sehu Mohamad)

*Corresponding author

<https://doi.org/10.33736/jcshd.8719.2025>

e-ISSN: 2550-1623

Manuscript received: 12 January 2025; Accepted: 23 March 2025; Date of publication: 31 March 2025

Copyright: This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the CC-BY-NC-SA (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, for non-commercial purposes, provided the original work of the author(s) is properly cited.

1 INTRODUCTION

International student mobility is a key component of global education, with an increasing number of students choosing to study abroad (Mohamed, 2020). Malaysia has actively attracted international students through educational reforms since 1996 (Yusliza & Chelliah, 2010). As of 2023, Malaysia hosts over 130,000 international students (“Zambry: Target for 250,000 International Students in Malaysia includes Both Public and Private institutions”, 2024). Addressing the psychological and cultural adaptation challenges they face is becoming ever more important (Siddharta, 2023). However, the process of cultural adaptation presents a range of difficulties that can significantly impact their mental well-being (Smith & Khawaja, 2011).

Adjusting to a new culture involves understanding different social norms, customs, and academic expectations. Many international students find it challenging to adapt to new lifestyles, dietary habits, and religious practices, which can be overwhelming (Bołtuć, 2021). Culture shock is common, leading to feelings of isolation and emotional distress (Zhou et al., 2008). Additionally, trying to integrate into the host culture while maintaining their own cultural identity can create internal conflicts (Sam & Berry, 2010). Discrimination and stereotypes may further contribute to social exclusion, affecting students' confidence, limiting their ability to build relationships, and increasing feelings of loneliness (Koenig, 2019). These challenges contribute to acculturative stress, a psychological strain that comes with adapting to a new culture (Wu et al., 2015).

Language barriers are another significant challenge affecting the academic and social experiences of international students (Kuo, 2011). Many struggle to understand lectures, write academic papers, and participate in discussions due to limited fluency in the host country's language (Ali et al., 2020). This not only affects their academic performance but also makes it difficult to communicate with peers and faculty, leading to social isolation (Prieto-Welch, 2016). A lack of confidence in speaking the local language can result in frustration and withdrawal from social interactions. Furthermore, poor language skills may prevent students from accessing essential services, such as healthcare and counselling, further increasing stress levels (Alsaifi & Shin, 2017). Financial stress also adds to these challenges, as high tuition fees and living expenses create additional pressure on students adjusting to a new environment (Nasr et al., 2024). Balancing academic demands while managing financial constraints may lead to anxiety and negatively impact overall well-being.

Berry's Acculturation Theory (2006) highlights the psychological strain international students face in balancing their cultural identity with integration into a new environment, often leading to confusion, identity crises, and emotional distress (Shu et al., 2020). Around 20% of international students' experience mental health issues annually, with many suffering from anxiety, depression, homesickness, and loneliness (Nair et al., 2023). Unfamiliar social and academic environments exacerbate these challenges, leading to persistent sadness, difficulty concentrating, sleep disturbances, and loss of motivation, all of which impact academic performance and overall well-being (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Cultural differences and language barriers further isolate students, making it difficult to form social connections and increasing frustration and withdrawal (Nyunt et al., 2021). Additionally, separation from family and academic pressure add to their stress, while limited access to culturally sensitive mental health support prevents many from seeking help, leaving their psychological distress unresolved (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008).

Recognising the impact of cultural and language barriers on international students is essential for creating effective support systems that promote mental well-being and academic success. These challenges not only affect communication and social integration but also increase the risk of culture shock, anxiety, and emotional distress (Pyvis & Chapman, 2005). By understanding these difficulties and exploring coping strategies, universities can implement targeted interventions to support students' adaptation and improve their mental well-being.

2 METHODS

2.1 Design

This study employed a qualitative research method, which aims to explore and understand participants' subjective experiences and social phenomena in detail (Wright et al., 2021) to examine the cultural adaptation experiences of international students and their impact on mental well-being. A phenomenological design, which focuses on understanding individuals' lived experiences and how they interpret them, was used to gain deep insights into the participants' personal perceptions and the emotional challenges they faced during the adaptation process. This approach was chosen to examine the complexities of cultural adjustment, identify issues such as anxiety, and highlight the role of social connections and coping strategies in supporting mental well-being. The phenomenological design provided a comprehensive understanding of the students' experiences during cultural adaptation.

2.2 Participants

The study sampled five undergraduate international students from Asia Pacific University of Technology & Innovation (APU) in Malaysia, aged 19 to 23, representing diverse cultural backgrounds, primarily from Asian (4 participants) and Egyptian origins (1 participant). A purposeful sampling method was used to select participants based on specific criteria: studying in Malaysia for at least one academic year, experiencing cultural adaptation challenges, and being willing to share their experiences. By focusing on these criteria, the study aimed to gain deeper insights into how cultural adaptation influences mental well-being. While phenomenological research typically includes five to 25 participants (Dodgson, 2023), data saturation was achieved with five, meaning additional participants were unlikely to provide new insights. Table 1 summarizes their demographic background.

2.3 Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with five international undergraduate students in Malaysia, focusing on the challenges of cultural adaptation and its impact on mental well-being. Ethical clearance was obtained from the School of Psychology (SOP) prior to conducting the interviews to ensure adherence to research guidelines. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent. Participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, with an emphasis on voluntary participation, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw at any time. The interviews were conducted in a private, comfortable setting to facilitate open discussions, and all data were securely stored. Transcripts were anonymised to protect participants' identities, and thematic analysis was carried out to identify key themes.

Table 1. Demographic background of participants.

| Demographic Variable | Categories | Number of Participants |
|----------------------|------------|------------------------|
| Gender | Male | 1 |
| | Female | 4 |
| Age Range | 19 | 1 |
| | 20 | 1 |
| | 21 | 1 |
| | 22 | 1 |
| | 23 | 1 |
| Country of Origin | India | 1 |
| | Pakistan | 2 |
| | Egypt | 1 |
| | Sri Lanka | 1 |

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach (Naeem et al., 2023). Initially, the interview transcripts were read multiple times to ensure familiarity with the content (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Key segments of the data were then systematically coded, with a focus on significant elements related to cultural adaptation and coping strategies. These codes were organised into broader themes, such as cultural challenges, language barriers, mental well-being challenges, and coping strategies. The themes were subsequently reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. Each theme was clearly defined and labelled to accurately capture its essence. The final analysis incorporated these themes, with supporting participant quotes used to illustrate the findings and provide insights into the impact of cultural adaptation on mental well-being (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

3 RESULTS

The results presented in this section highlight several factors identified in the analysis, as outlined in Table 2. The details are presented below:

3.1 The Challenges Faced by International Students

International students face numerous challenges when adapting to life in a new country, which can significantly affect their academic and emotional well-being. Cultural differences, homesickness, and academic pressures are common issues that make their adjustment more difficult.

3.1.1 Cultural Adaptation Challenges

This research identified several key challenges in cultural adaptation, including food, festival celebrations, commuting, clothing, and experiences of racism. Food emerged as a significant issue for all participants.

“Food was the biggest problem for me. 'cause my tasteful is quite different from the actual Malaysian food.” (Participant 02, Female)

Three participants also faced challenges related to dietary restrictions, particularly the availability of halal food.

“When I came here, I was hesitant to go to restaurants because I did not know if they're serving. Halal food or Haram food. So, I had to, uh, like ask them to confirm if they're serving halal food.” (Participant 01, Female)

Festival celebrations, particularly Eid and Ramadan, were also different from what participants were accustomed to in their home countries.

“In the year like Ramadan or something. I just feel like I want to be with my family to celebrate.” (Participant 05, Female)

Participants highlighted challenges related to commuting and transportation costs.

“Like when I have to go to places over here, you need a touch go card so for that, we had to go all the way to PS station. You have to pay grab and if you're going very far, it's. Will cost you a lot.” (Participant 01, Female)

Cultural differences in clothing, particularly around the wearing of the hijab, were also noted by three participants.

“In my country, although there's hijab and things like that. But you know, there's a limit to way you can do it. Mostly you'll find people in of a national dress, which is you know, wearing hijab, things like that. Here they are wearing shorts as well. So, that is a culture shift.” (Participant 02, Female)

All participants also experienced some form of racism or unequal treatment.

“I feel like somehow there is racism. And again, okay. When I go to mall or anything, if a person is speaking Bahasa, the attendant would give them more favour.” (Participant 02 Female)

3.1.2 Academic Challenges

All participants reported experiencing academic challenges, such as difficulties in understanding assignments and feeling overwhelmed by the workload.

“Right now, I'm in my final year I do have a lot of assignments to be done and I'm still doing on it, working on it and it make me feel very stress.” (Participant 04, Male)

One participant faced challenges in understanding scientific terminology during their first year, which contributed to academic difficulties.

“In my first year, Uh, I didn't understand the, the terms, the, the, the scientist terms. With the academic, uh, for the slides, for the lectures, or the questions for exams, or all this thing. Actually, I, I failed in subject, and I retake it for like two, two times or one time because of that. That I didn't understand what you asked me.” (Participant 05, Female)

3.1.3 Homesickness

Homesickness emerged as a common emotional challenge among all participants, with many expressing feelings of missing their families and the comforts of home.

“I need my mom the most because she has been always the one who has supported me and gave me relief that if you didn't do anything, nothing will happen to you.” (Participant 02, Female)

3.1.4 Financial Challenges

All participants struggle with unexpected financial burdens upon arriving in Malaysia, such as accommodation costs, transportation, and daily expenses.

“You have to pay grab and if you're going very far, it's. Will cost you a lot” (Participant 01, Female)

“The delivery fees, the food is like 5 ringgits and it's like 13 ringgits. I'm like, oh my god” (Participant 03, Female)

3.2 Language Barriers' Impact

Communication difficulties revealed how language barriers affect international students' academic and social experiences, as well as their self-confidence. This theme highlights the complexities of cultural adaptation and its impact on both academic and personal well-being.

3.2.1 Communication Difficulties

This theme covers several aspects, including struggles in making friends, accent differences, and misunderstandings. All five participants shared the common challenge of communication during their first year in Malaysia. The language barrier posed significant hurdles, affecting their mental well-being.

“Most of the time in Malaysia, people only know Malay. Which gets very hard for me to communicate.” (Participant 02, Female)

One participant faced an additional layer of difficulty due to her limited English proficiency, which impacted her daily life and university interactions.

“The daily life also, I cannot, like, uh, if you are lost. I think everyone lost in Malaysia in the beginning. If I lost, if I wanted to ask someone to explain me how to go to there, how to go to where, uh, I can't understand them So, yeah, I had a lot of problems with this. University, daily life, friends, uh, Order something.” (Participant 05, Female)

Three participants noted that making friends with local students was difficult, especially when they primarily spoke Bahasa or their native languages, making them feel out of place.

“With local students, uh, they mostly speak Bahasa and sometimes when you are interacting with that group, it gets, you know, very, like you don't know what they're talking about, so you just feel a bit out of the place.” (Participant 02, female)

Another shared challenge was understanding accents. All five participants mentioned difficulties in comprehending local accents and slang.

“They have a lot of like, Malay slangs into their communication in English. So, when sometimes when my... Malaysian friends or like local friends, when they speak, I'm just looking at them like nothing is going through my head.” (Participant 03, Female)

In addition, two participants highlighted misunderstandings due to differences in terminology.

“I asked the man if he has popcorn, you know, those thin packet? Ones where you just put it in the store, like the cooking pot and they just, you'll have them ready in like what, five, 10 minutes? But this person couldn't understand. He thought, I'm talking about a pack of chips.” (Participant 01, Female)

Language barriers also had a significant impact on the mental well-being of some participants. One of the participants shared a personal experience of feeling insecure and losing confidence due to communication difficulties.

“They make me feel like, uh, stupid, special person. I faced that with some lecturer, why you can't understand me I said that for two and three times. If you can't understand you have to go and improve your language first it makes me feel embarrassing and I lost my confidence in this time.” (Participant 05, Female)

3.3 Mental Well-Being Challenges

International students often face significant mental well-being challenges as they adapt to life in a new country. Among these challenges, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and isolation stand out as common struggles that impact their overall experience.

3.3.1 Depression and Anxiety

All five participants expressed experiencing symptoms of depression and anxiety, particularly during their initial period of adjustment.

“So initially it was there when it comes to depression and other mental issues, I don't think I might say that. Yeah, in the past I have developed anxiety and sometimes now I get panic attacks” (Participant 02, Female)

“You know I had, um, depression. And anxiety all the time” (Participant 05, Female)

3.3.2 Loneliness and Isolation

Feelings of loneliness and isolation were common among four participants, particularly during their early months in Malaysia. Being away from family and struggling to form connections made the adjustment process even more challenging

“I become more sensitive person, feeling alone all the time. I become like, um, I don't want to see anyone more” (Participant 05, Female)

“When you start living on your own without your parents. I didn't find anybody around me” (Participant 02, Female)

3.4 Coping Strategies

In response to the various challenges of cultural adaptation, international students employ several coping strategies to manage their new environment and safeguard their mental well-being. Key strategies identified by participants include engaging in extracurricular activities, forming supportive friendships, and seeking counselling services.

3.4.1 Engage in Extracurricular Activities

All participants highlighted participating in extracurricular activities as an effective way to cope with cultural adaptation. They found that joining clubs, attending events, visiting malls, hiking, and trying new foods helped them feel more connected to their new surroundings. For instance:

“What I initially did was I made a lot of friends, and I went out with them to different places. Not only mall, but I went for hiking as well.” (Participant 02, Female)

3.4.2 Supportive Friendships

Supportive friendships played a vital role in easing the adaptation process. Participants shared that friends and flatmates offered emotional support and guidance, helping them navigate various challenges.

“There was one of my friends who was my roommate as well. She knew what that particular time, you know, things were going on and everything. She knew about everything, and she was there with me and every time I needed anything she was there. So that kind of support I also, you know, took from her.” (Participant 02, Female)

3.4.3 Counselling Sessions

Counselling sessions were viewed as a helpful resource for managing cultural adaptation challenges, particularly for those lacking a strong support system. Although three participants had not used counselling services themselves, they recognised their potential benefits.

“Because I came with one of my friends, it became easier for me to make more friends. But if I would have come alone, I think I might would have go for counselling sessions.” (Participant 02, Female)

One participant successfully utilised online counselling in their native language.

“I tried to talk for online counselling in Arabic. That make me more easy than speak in English.” (Participant 05, Female)

3.4.4 Personal Growth

Although all participants faced difficult emotional experiences, they grew stronger through these challenges. For instance, Participant five who initially struggled with depression, later reflected on how she became a more independent and resilient person.

“Now I'm thinking with my mind, not with my heart. Um, Uh, I learned a lot of things. I learned how to be a more responsible person. I learned how to be more, uh, Don't care about all these things. Just, uh, make it away” (Participant 05, Female)

Similarly, one participant encouraged new students to step out of their comfort zone.

“I would always say this, but try to make friends from different backgrounds. Like don't try to stick with your own kind. If you are from this country, try to get to know them, because, um, some challenges they face, you might not face it, but you can understand where they're coming from. So, if anything, just try to get to know people, or like, just talk with them, it's not that hard, honestly.” (Participant 03, Female)

Table 2. Summary of master themes and sub-themes.

| Master Themes | Sub-Themes |
|--|---|
| The Challenges Faced by International Students | Cultural adaptation challenges Academic challenges Homesickness Financial challenges |
| Language Barriers' Impact | Communication difficulties |
| Mental Well-Being Challenges | Depression and anxiety Loneliness and Isolation |
| Coping Strategies | Engage in extracurricular activities Supportive friendships Counselling sessions Personal Growth |

4 DISCUSSION

This study explored the challenges faced by international students and their impact on overall well-being and academic experiences. Adjusting to life in a new country presents significant difficulties, including cultural differences, homesickness, academic pressures, financial constraints, and language barriers. This research specifically examined the experiences of international students adapting to Malaysian culture, education, and social norms. The findings highlight the need for stronger institutional support systems to improve the international student experience. These findings align with existing research, such as Berry et al.'s (2006) Acculturation Theory, which describes the psychological strain of cultural adaptation. Similarly, Zhou et al. (2008) found that language barriers contribute to social isolation and academic difficulties, reflecting the struggles reported by participants in this study. Prieto-Welch (2016) also identified homesickness as a major challenge for international students,

which affects their overall well-being. These obstacles can significantly impact students' mental health, academic performance, and their ability to adjust to their new environment (Wu et al., 2015). Recognising these challenges emphasises the importance of structured institutional support to facilitate smoother adaptation and ensure student success.

One significant challenge faced by international students is the impact of language barriers. These barriers affect many aspects of daily life, especially communication. For example, students often struggle to form friendships and to understand the accents of their peers and instructors. Language difficulties are particularly pronounced during the first year of study, as students adjust to a new academic and social environment. Previous research supports these findings. Medved et al. (2013) identified that international students frequently encounter language obstacles, hindering their academic and social integration. Furthermore, Poyrazlı and Grahame (2007) found that a lack of social support, combined with language difficulties, often leads to stress and confusion, which negatively impacts academic performance. This aligns with the experiences reported in this study. Additionally, accents present further challenges in multicultural academic settings. Variations in pronunciation and speech patterns often result in miscommunication, frustration, and decreased self-confidence, as noted by Derwing and Munro (2009). These findings support the struggles observed in this study, where students reported difficulties in understanding and being understood, contributing to a sense of isolation and anxiety (Kumaraswamy, 2013).

Beyond language barriers, international students face additional challenges when adapting to the cultural aspects of their new environment. Adjusting to unfamiliar cuisines and managing dietary restrictions, such as finding halal food for Muslim students, is particularly difficult (Mustafa, 2019). Food plays a vital role, not only as a practical necessity but also as an emotional anchor, connecting students to their home culture and providing comfort during the adaptation process. This finding is supported by Jin et al. (2023) and Chen et al. (2019), who emphasise that food is an important source of emotional support for students navigating cultural adjustment. In addition to cultural differences, financial difficulties related to daily expenses, accommodation costs, and transportation create added stress for international students. High living costs can lead to financial strain, forcing students to limit spending on essential needs, further affecting their well-being (Wilson et al., 2022). Cultural festivals also present challenges, as they can trigger homesickness, particularly when students miss the presence of family and familiar customs during these events. Rathakrishnan et al. (2021) discuss how such experiences amplify the emotional strain of cultural adaptation. These challenges underscore the importance of institutional support. Universities can play a crucial role by creating culturally inclusive initiatives, such as organising events that celebrate diverse traditions and providing access to culturally appropriate meals. Such measures address both practical and emotional needs, fostering a sense of belonging and reducing the challenges of cultural adaptation.

The lack of interaction with professors and peers, coupled with academic pressure, can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, making it more difficult for students to seek help or build social connections. Persistent isolation can further contribute to emotional distress, diminishing motivation and overall engagement in academic and social activities. These factors not only hinder academic performance but also negatively impact students' mental well-being, increasing the risk of burnout and prolonged psychological distress. Addressing academic challenges requires a proactive and targeted approach. Clear communication between teachers and students is essential to ensure that expectations are well understood. Implementing culturally sensitive teaching practices that accommodate diverse educational backgrounds and

learning styles can create a more inclusive academic environment. Additionally, mentorship programmes and workshops can equip international students with the tools they need to navigate academic systems effectively. By fostering a supportive and adaptable academic environment, universities can help reduce stress and promote academic success for international students.

To cope with these challenges, international students adopt various strategies, including participating in extracurricular activities, forming supportive friendships, and seeking counselling. Extracurricular activities play a crucial role in reducing social isolation by offering opportunities for connection and a sense of belonging (Heikinheimo & Shute, 1986; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). These studies support the findings, emphasising the importance of social engagement in helping students adjust to their new cultural environment. Supportive friendships further serve as a key coping mechanism. Research by Yao (2016) and Li and Zizzi (2018) shows that peer relationships provide emotional support and practical guidance, helping students navigate academic and social challenges while reducing feelings of isolation. These friendships also promote resilience, enabling students to better adapt to the complexities of life in a foreign country.

Counselling services are another essential coping resource. While research on international students' use of counselling is limited, studies by Ang and Liamputtong (2008) and Sakiz and Jencius (2024) emphasise the importance of accessible mental health services in addressing the psychological challenges associated with cultural adaptation. These studies suggest that counselling provides a crucial space for students to express their concerns, develop coping strategies, and manage the stress of adjusting to new academic and cultural environments. Furthermore, institutions that prioritise culturally competent mental health services, such as multilingual counselling and culturally sensitive therapists, can significantly enhance students' emotional resilience and overall well-being (Yakushko et al., 2008). Offering tailored mental health resources, alongside opportunities for social engagement, helps create a supportive and inclusive environment, empowering international students to thrive both academically and personally.

Beyond overcoming challenges, these experiences also contribute to personal growth. Adapting to a new environment fosters independence, resilience, and cross-cultural competence, equipping students with valuable skills that benefit their academic and professional journeys. Overall, the challenges faced by international students, ranging from language barriers and cultural adjustment to academic pressures, are multifaceted and deeply intertwined with their overall well-being. The findings of this study, supported by existing research, highlight the need for comprehensive support systems in educational institutions to help students navigate these challenges effectively. By fostering a supportive environment that addresses the specific needs of international students, universities can enhance their academic success and overall experience in a new cultural setting.

The findings of this study highlight the importance of tailored support systems to address the challenges faced by international students, including language barriers, cultural differences, academic pressures, financial distress, and homesickness. While traditional approaches such as comprehensive orientation sessions and culturally sensitive teaching methods play a significant role, universities should also explore innovative solutions to enhance their effectiveness. For instance, technology-based support systems can provide scalable and accessible resources. Remote peer mentorship platforms can connect new international students with experienced peers, offering guidance and easing their transition.

To address mental health challenges, universities should hire multilingual, culturally aware therapists to create safe spaces where students can express themselves comfortably. Additionally, stress management and resilience-building workshops tailored to students' cultural contexts can help them develop effective coping strategies. Addressing financial distress is also essential, as financial strain can heighten anxiety and impact academic performance. Universities should offer financial aid, scholarships, and budgeting workshops to help students manage expenses. In addition to financial and mental health support, technology can further enhance student well-being by providing resources such as multilingual counselling apps, AI-driven tools, mindfulness apps, and video-based wellness programmes, ensuring students have access to both personalised and scalable support.

Implementing these solutions requires a clear, structured process. Universities should begin by assessing international students' needs through surveys, focus groups, and interviews. Training faculty and staff to incorporate mental health resources into existing support systems is also essential. To ensure continuous improvement, feedback mechanisms such as mobile apps, anonymous suggestion platforms, and follow-up surveys can provide actionable insights. By integrating innovative technology, culturally tailored support, and effective feedback systems, universities can foster a welcoming and inclusive environment that promotes international students' academic success and overall well-being.

Despite the valuable insights gained, this study had several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, relying on self-reported data through interviews may have introduced biases, such as social desirability bias, where participants underreported or overreported their experiences to meet perceived expectations. Language barriers were another challenge, as participants sometimes struggled to fully understand the interview questions or express their thoughts and emotions accurately in a second language. Additionally, discussing sensitive topics such as homesickness and mental health may have made participants uncomfortable or hesitant to share certain details, leading to missing or underexplored aspects of their experiences.

To enhance future research on the cultural adaptation of international students, several recommendations should be considered. First, researchers should create a more comfortable interview environment and consider using shorter, more engaging formats to encourage participants to openly discuss sensitive topics, such as mental health. This approach would help prevent fatigue or disengagement during longer interviews, which can compromise data quality. Additionally, incorporating memory aids or structured prompts can assist participants in recalling specific details, improving the accuracy and depth of their responses.

Addressing communication barriers is also crucial. Language differences can lead to misunderstandings or incomplete responses, so providing translated materials or utilising interpreters can ensure participants fully understand the questions and can express themselves accurately. Offering interviews in the participants' native language or multiple language options can further enhance data accuracy. By applying these strategies, future research can gain more detailed insights into the challenges of cultural adaptation and improve understanding of international students' experiences.

In conclusion, this study identified key challenges faced by international students, including language barriers, academic pressures, cultural adaptation, and financial constraints. Language difficulties affected communication, social interactions, and academic performance, while cultural differences, particularly in food and traditions, contributed to emotional distress.

Financial pressures related to accommodation and daily expenses added to students' stress, and homesickness, alongside academic pressures, led to feelings of isolation, depression, loneliness, and anxiety, particularly as students progressed in their studies. To cope with these difficulties, students relied on extracurricular activities, supportive friendships, and counselling services, which played a crucial role in helping them adjust to their new environment. The study highlights the importance of universities providing structured orientation programmes, accessible mental health support, financial assistance, and culturally inclusive academic resources. Strengthening these support systems can improve international students' adaptation, fostering a more positive academic and social experience while promoting their overall well-being and success.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to sincerely thank the participants for sharing their experiences, without which this study would not have been possible. Their openness and insights have been invaluable and have contributed significantly to this research. This research received no specific grant from public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agencies.

REFERENCES

- Ali, S., Yoenanto, N. H., & Nurdibyanandaru, D. (2020). Language barrier is the cause of stress among international students of Universitas Airlangga. *Prasasti: Journal of Linguistics*, 5(2), 242. <https://doi.org/10.20961/prasasti.v5i2.44355>
- Alsahafi, N., & Shin, S. (2017). Factors affecting the academic and cultural adjustment of Saudi international students in Australian universities. *Journal of International Students*, 7(1), 53–72. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v7i1.245>
- Ang, P. L., & Liamputtong, P. (2008). Out of the circle: International students and the use of university counselling services. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 48(1), 108–130. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.148964326232340>
- Berry, J. W., Phinney, J. S., Sam, D. L., & Vedder, P. (2006). Immigrant youth: Acculturation, identity, and adaptation. *Applied Psychology*, 55(3), 303–332. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1464-0597.2006.00256.x>
- Bołtuć, M. I. (2021). Cultural adaptation, manipulation, and creativity in translation. *Acta Neophilologica*, 1(XXIII), 229–238. <https://doi.org/10.31648/an.5512>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A. T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in psychology, Vol. 2. Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological, and biological* (pp. 57–71). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004>

- Cemalcilar, Z., & Falbo, T. (2008). A longitudinal study of the adaptation of international students in the United States. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, 39(6), 799–804. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022022108323787>
- Chen, B., Tabassum, H., & Saeed, M. A. (2019). International Muslim students. *Journal of International Students*, 9(4), 933–953. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v9i3.753>
- Derwing, T. M., & Munro, M. J. (2009). Putting accent in its place: Rethinking obstacles to communication. *Language Teaching*, 42(4), 476–490. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s026144480800551x>
- Dodgson, J. E. (2023). Phenomenology: Researching the lived experience. *Journal of Human Lactation*, 39(3), 385–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344231176453>
- Heikinheimo, P. S., & Shute, J. C. M. (1986). The adaptation of foreign students: Students' views and institutional implications. *Journal of College Students Personnel*, 27, 399–405.
- Jin, R., Nguyen, M.-H., Quang-Loc, N., Nguyen, T. Q., Le, T.-T., & Vuong, Q.-H. (2023). A gender study of food stress and implications for international students' acculturation. *World*, 4(1), 80–94. <https://doi.org/10.3390/world4010006>
- Khawaja, N. G., & Stallman, H. M. (2011). Understanding the coping strategies of international students: A qualitative approach. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling*, 21(2), 203–224. <https://doi.org/10.1375/ajgc.21.2.203>
- Koenig, M. (2019). Reconfiguring cultural differences. *Social Science History*, 43(2), 369–378. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2019.8>
- Kumaraswamy, N. (2013). Academic stress, anxiety, and depression among college students: A brief review. *International Review of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 5(1), 135–143.
- Kuo, Y. H. (2011). Language challenges faced by international graduate students in the United States. *Journal of International Students*, 1(2), 38–42. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v1i2.551>
- Li, S., & Zizzi, S. (2018). A case study of international students' social adjustment, friendship development, and physical activity. *Journal of International Students*, 8(1), 389–408. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v8i1.171>
- Medved, D., Franco, A., Gao, X., & Yang, F. (2013). *Challenges in teaching international students: Group separation, language barriers and culture differences*. Genombrottet, Lunds Tekniska Högskola.
- Mohamed, M. A. (2020). Challenges and adjustment of international students in Malaysia: Pre-departure factors and post-arrival strategies. *Asian Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies*, 8(10), 43–52.
- Mustafa, E. (2019). Evaluating the role of halal food in Malaysia as an edu-tourism hub: The case of Muslim international students. *Journal of Hospitality and Networks*, 1(2019), 55–63.

- Naeem, M., Ozuem, W., Howell, K., & Ranfagni, S. (2023). A step-by-step process of thematic analysis to develop a conceptual model in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 22. <https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069231205789>
- Nair, A., Kalembo, F., Zhou, H., Ng, L., Hawley, G., Grogan, A., Ng, L., Chen, W., Daire, J., & Lim, E. (2023). Mental health and coping strategies among international health science students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A cross-sectional study. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 19(1), e208–e216. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.teln.2023.10.022>
- Nasr, R., Rahman, A. A., Haddad, C., Nasr, N., Karam, J., Hayek, J., Ismael, I., Swaidan, E., Salameh, P., & Alami, N. (2024). The impact of financial stress on student wellbeing in Lebanese higher education. *BMC Public Health*, 24, 1809. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-024-19312-0>
- Nyunt, G., Koo, K., Witkowsky, P., & Andino, M. (2023). *International student identities and mental well-being*. Star Scholars Press. <https://press.starscholars.org/press/catalog/book/7>
- Poyrazlı, Ş., & Grahame, K. M. (2007). Barriers to adjustment: Needs of International students within a semi-urban campus community. *Journal of Instructional Psychology*, 34(1), 28–45. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ761254>
- Prieto-Welch, S. L. (2016). International student mental health. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2016(156), 53–63. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.20191>
- Pyvis, D., & Chapman, A. (2005). Culture shock and the international student ‘offshore’. *Journal of Research in International Education*, 4(1), 23–42. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1475240905050289>
- Rathakrishnan, B., Singh, S. S. B., Ghazali, M. F., Yahaya, A., Mohammed, N. H., & Kamaluddin, M. R. (2021). Association between quality of sleep and academic performance: Evidence from undergraduate students from Sabah, Malaysia. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education and Development*, 10(1), 620–628. <https://doi.org/10.6007/ijarped/v10-i1/9549>
- Sakız, H., & Jencius, M. (2024). Structural components of inclusive counseling services for international university students. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counselling*, 46(2), 402–425. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10447-023-09540-1>
- Sam, D. L., & Berry, J. W. (2010). Acculturation. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 5(4), 472–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691610373075>
- Shu, F., Ahmed, S. F., Pickett, M. L., Ayman, R., & McAbee, S. T. (2020). Social support perceptions, network characteristics, and international student adjustment. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 74, 136–148. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2019.11.002>
- Siddharta, A. (2023, July 6). *Number of international students in higher education in Malaysia 2022, by country*. Statista. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/866731/international-students-in-malaysia-by-country-of-origin/>

Smith, R. A., & Khawaja, N. G. (2011). A review of the acculturation experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 35(6), 699–713. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004>

Vaismoradi, M., Jones, J., Turunen, H., & Snelgrove, S. (2016). Theme development in qualitative content analysis and thematic analysis. *Journal of Nursing Education and Practice*, 6(5), 100–110. <https://doi.org/10.5430/jnep.v6n5p100>

Wilson, S., Hastings, C., Morris, A., Ramia, G., & Mitchell, E. (2022). International students on the edge: The precarious impacts of financial stress. *Journal of Sociology*, 59(4), 952–974. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14407833221084756>

Wright, K. E., Lucero, J. E., Ferguson, J. K., Granner, M. L., Devereux, P. G., Pearson, J. L., & Crosbie, E. (2021). The influence of cultural food security on cultural identity and well-being: A qualitative comparison between second-generation American and international students in the United States. *Ecology of Food and Nutrition*, 60(6), 636–662. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03670244.2021.1875455>

Wu, H. P., Garza, E., & Guzman, N. (2015). International student's challenge and adjustment to college. *Education Research International*, 2015, 202753. <https://doi.org/10.1155/2015/202753>

Yakushko, O., Davidson, M. M., & Sanford-Martens, T. C. (2008). Seeking help in a foreign land: International students' use patterns for a U.S. university counseling center. *Journal of College Counseling*, 11(1), 6–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2008.tb00020.x>

Yao, C. W. (2016). Unfulfilled expectations: Influence of Chinese international students' roommate relationships on sense of belonging. *Journal of International Students*, 6(3), 762–778. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v6i3.355>

Yusliza, M. Y., & Chelliah, S. (2010). Adjustment in international students in Malaysian public university. *International Journal of Innovation, Management and Technology*, 1(3), 275–278. <http://ijimt.org/papers/51-M437.pdf>

Zambry: Target for 250,000 international students in Malaysia includes both public and private institutions. (2024, October 18). *Malay Mail*. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/malaysia/2024/10/18/zambry-target-for-250000-international-students-in-malaysia-includes-both-public-and-private-institutions/154008>

Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K., & Todman, J. (2008). Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(1), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070701794833>