

# A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Approach to Socio-cultural and Academic Adjustment Experiences of International Students

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## Abstract

*This study sets out to capture the essence of the socio-cultural and academic lived experiences of international students in a private higher education institution as the phenomenon of adjustment has neither been studied extensively nor qualitatively in the South East Asian setting. The narrations of 12 international students from four countries; Nigeria, Korea, India and Indonesia were gathered through prolonged conversational interviews. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim and meaning units identified using the selective and highlighting approach. The formulated meaning units were then arranged into clusters which resulted in five themes. The paper concludes with the discussion of specific implications and recommendations to improve the campus climate for diversity.*

**Key words** international education, socio-cultural adjustments, academic adjustments, phenomenology, essence.

## Introduction

The international student population in Malaysia has grown dramatically over the past decade. Malaysia has been successful in attracting foreign students due to its favourable environment and cost competitiveness. As at December 2004, the number of international students in Malaysia was 40 686; this number includes 25 939 international students in private higher education institutions, 6 315 students in public higher education institutions and the remaining 8 432 students at the school level (Sulaiman 2005). Hence, private institutions of higher education operating in the country are significant players that dominate the international student market. Many international students enrol into these private institutions before leaving the country for a third country, usually in the West.

Although adjustment as a phenomenon has been well documented in literature, but educators in higher education institutions in Malaysia still do not have access to a body of knowledge which can guide their orientation towards diversity in their unique landscape. Therefore, this study uses the phenomenological approach to study the lived experiences of international students enrolled in the American Degree Transfer Program (ADP) of an established private higher education institution in the country through the process of deep attentiveness and empathetic understanding. Since the study of lived experience begins with the awareness of glimpses of the phenomenon it was both, conversations and encounters with international students in our classes that led us to pursue this study.

Coming to a new and foreign country for further education is often looked upon as an enriching experience; however, many international students are often plagued with uncertainty and disorientation of finding their way around new cultures and social expectations. Many complex challenges face international students especially if the culture of their host country is strikingly different from that of their home country – the greater the cultural distance, the more challenges to be faced (Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001). Thus, easing the adjustment of students to college life has become an increasingly important concern in recent years due to the potential impact of adjustment problems on student attrition rates (Hurtado et al. 1996).

A review of literature on adjustment experiences of international students in higher education reveals suggestions about the nature of the phenomenon of crossing cultures. Much of the recent research on cross-cultural adjustment of international students has focused on the socio-cultural, psychological and academic aspects and most of these studies have been conducted in western settings namely the United States and Britain. Many studies have also been conducted in Australian and New Zealand universities but very few have been conducted in the South East Asian (Malaysian) landscape. Furthermore, although there is much phenomenological research that has been done in the many disciplines in recent years, only a few studies in the area of nursing have used the phenomenological approach to study the adjustment experiences of international students. One such study by DeLuca (2005) reveals that Jordanian nursing students faced several socio-cultural and academic difficulties such as a mismatch of cultural values, inadequate English language skills, difficulty in establishing friendships, uncertainty about academic expectations and the different teaching and learning methods and inadequate academic conventions while studying at an American university. Therefore, this study adopts the phenomenological approach and focuses on the socio-cultural and academic adjustment experiences of international students enrolled in an American Degree Transfer Program (ADP) of a private higher educational institution in Malaysia.

According to Barker (1999), socio-cultural adjustment refers to 'culture-specific skills, the ability to negotiate the host culture and general behavioural competence' (Barker 1999, p.6). The many qualitative and quantitative studies on adjustment experiences of international students have identified the following socio-cultural adjustment factors to be those commonly encountered by international students across the globe in their respective foreign institutions of higher learning – language barrier (Searle and Ward 1990; Wang & Shan 2007; Zhang 2002), mismatch of cultural values (Mehdizadeh & Scott 2005; Talbot et al. 1999, Major 2005; Wang & Shan 2007), discomfort with the new physical environment (Searle & Ward 1990; Talbot et al. 1999), difficulty and frustration in establishing friendships and relationships (Searle & Ward 1990, Wang & Shan 2006; Lewthwaite 1996), low participation in social events and leisure activities (Mehdizadeh & Scott 2005; Wang & Shan 2007), discrimination and stereotyping (Talbot et al. 1999), lack of practical social support (Mehdizadeh & Scott 2005; Burns 1991), accommodation difficulties (Burns 1991; Lin & Yi 1997), dietary restrictions (Lin & Yi 1997) and financial stress (Burns 1991).

The predominant academic factors of adjustment experiences identified thus far amongst international students are the different teaching and learning approaches/methods (Stoynoff 1997; Major 2005; Zhang 2002; Lewthwaite 1996; Mehdizadeh & Scott 2005), different relationship between faculty and students (Wang & Shan 2007; Major 2005; Zhang 2002), different expectations set by the faculty (Major 2005; Zhang 2002), difficulty following academic conventions, difficulty utilising learning resources (Stoynoff 1997; Wang & Shan 2007), inadequate language proficiency levels (Lewthwaite 1996). The research questions that inform this study are as follows: 1)What is the essence of the adjustment experiences of international students at ADP? and 2)What are the differences in socio-cultural and academic adjustment experiences of the Nigerian, Korean, Indonesian and Indian groups of international students enrolled in the ADP?

## **Methodology**

Since the research objective is to describe the essence of the adjustment experiences of the international students, it is important to understand several students' common experiences of adjustment to understand the essence of the phenomenon. We thus adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological approach. According to Van Manen (1997) phenomenology is the study of essences, the very nature of a phenomenon, for that which makes a some -'thing' what it is – and without which it could not be what it is. Therefore, while on the one hand, the topic requires a phenomenological sensitivity and understanding of the lived experiences of the realities and life worlds of international students, on the other, it requires a hermeneutic ability to make interpretive sense of the phenomena of the life world to see the significance of situations and relations of being an international student

A multiple case design (Merriam 1998) which would provide the research with the logic of both literal replication (similar adjustment experiences) and theoretical replication (different or contrasting adjustment experiences because of cultural distance) is adopted. The criterion based sampling technique is employed and a sample of 12 international students – 3 students each from 4 countries (Nigeria, Korea, Indonesian and India) is selected. The criteria that each of the subjects had to fulfil is as follows: 1) Enrolled as an

international student in the American Degree Program, 2) Have been in the ADP for more than 6 months and 3) Is able to articulate their lived experiences in the English Language. The persons who meet the inclusion criteria are then approached and asked to participate. Interviews are conducted over 4 months at a specified site. Each informant is then subjected to 2 in-depth interviews lasting 1 hour each. All interviews are tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The researchers then adopt the phenomenological attitude which included 'bracketing'. Bracketing requires a rigorous reflection on one's bias and opinions and suspending one's natural attitude. The transcripts are read over and over in order to achieve a holistic and intuitive understanding of the phenomena. Subsequently, the selective reading/highlighting approach prescribed by Van Manen (1997) is used in analysing the participants' transcripts. The researchers read each interview transcription several times asking the question, 'what statement or phrase seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon (adjustment) being described.' The statements (significant statements) are then highlighted and meanings formulated. The meaning units are then clustered into themes allowing for the emergence of themes common to all of the participants' transcripts.

## **Results**

From the 12 verbatim transcripts, a total of 271 significant statements were extracted and their respective meanings formulated. A total of 5 themes (common to all of the participants' transcripts) emerged: *Theme 1* Of strangeness, expectations and disillusionment, *Theme 2* Of divides and bonds, *Theme 3* Of perceptions, prejudice and culture, *Theme 4* Of challenges and achievements and *Theme 5* Of social support and neglect.

### **Nigerian International Students (NIS)**

From the interviews with the three Nigerian students, 75 significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes.

#### **Of strangeness, expectations and disillusionment**

The NIS are made several promises by the agent who recruits them that Asians are very warm, Malaysia is a beautiful country, very nice environment, you can study, you can work, etc. However, none of the expectations stood; in fact the reality that they are faced with upon arrival is quite the opposite. For instance, the NIS are expecting a warm welcome when they arrive at KLIA (Kuala Lumpur International Airport), but the personnel is not there to pick them, leaving the NIS to spend the night at KLIA. This first experience is so traumatic for one informant that the NIS says 'if only I had a return ticket, I would have gone back the same day.' The campus size is another huge disappointment that weighs heavily on the NIS. As one NIS exclaimed, 'Are we in the right place, let me check my demo CD again' upon arrival at the college premises. Even a peer in a neighbouring college teases the NIS about their matchbox size campus library. The accommodation facilities provided by the college is also not up to the expectations of the NIS, 'It is too cramped and so many rules to follow.' Thus, most of the NIS expectations are crushed.

#### **Of Divides and Bonds**

Language accent does pose problems for the NIS. The NIS can understand and be understood by their Malaysian Indian peers and lecturers, 'I find it very easy to follow what they are saying' thus, interact better with them. However, conversations with the other ethnic groups namely the Malays and Chinese are less successful and at a rather rudimentary level because the NIS cannot get past the language accent 'Sometimes when they speak I hear Chinese in it.' This leaves most of the conversations between these groups of students to be coupled with questions such as 'What did you say? What was that? Could you please repeat?' This difference in accent, among other things, also leads to feelings of discrimination. One NIS interprets the lack of interaction between her Chinese group mates and her to be due to the fact that 'the local Chinese are racist and they do not like black skinned people.'

#### **Of Perception, Prejudice and Culture**

The NIS perceive the Malaysian public to be rather hostile because whenever the NIS approach them to ask for information, 'they would just frown and walk away, so you are standing there like a complete idiot.' The NIS also feel that the local students in ADP are not sensitive to their culture at all based on the

questions and remarks they ask and make. One informant is rather insulted when asked if there are wild animals roaming the streets in their country while another is overcome by anger when a local student made a rather derogatory generalization about Africans in a formal class presentation 'African's have low IQs and that's a fact.' The NIS also express much annoyance with regards to the comments 'it looks like a nightgown and bed sheet' by the locals about their cultural costume.

The NIS also feel discriminated by a few faculty members. In one instance, the student is embarrassed in front of the whole class halfway through a presentation when the lecturer said, 'Nevermind I give you a 0, go back to your place.' Since this incident the informant felt that the lecturer just kept picking on her which led her to generalize that all Chinese lecturers are biased and to be cautious in their classes 'I then had this thing that Chinese lecturers are like that. They are biased. Be careful.' Another informant's negative experience with a faculty member leaves her feeling 'different' and singled out from the rest of her course mates 'I've never felt a colour difference until I got to this class' and her intellectual curiosity stifled when reprimanded by her lecturer for asking questions 'I know you got full marks for participation, let other students participate as well.'

Friendships are difficult to initiate and maintain in the local setting because of the difference in cultural script. Although Malaysians may appear friendly with people whom they have just met but this does not indicate 'deep friendships' whereas in Nigeria, once you are considered a friend, 'They will open their doors without any reservation' and 'will stand up for you no matter what, even if it meant covering up for a bad thing you did.' In Malaysia it is quite the opposite though, 'as much as we are friends, you take care of yourself.' So the friendly behaviour of Malaysian students is quite confusing to the NIS because they feel disappointed when they find out that they cannot rely on their Malaysian friends the way they thought the friendly behaviour suggested they could.

Food is also a problem for the NIS. Malaysian food is unappetizing to because 'they put sugar into the curry. I can't eat that.' Therefore their diet lacks variety 'I eat the same thing' as they resort mostly to consuming instant noodles and wheat bread.

### **Of Challenges and Achievements**

The academic culture in ADP and that of Nigeria is quite contrasting. The academic environment in ADP is educative, happy, interactive and energetic. The lecturers contributed greatly to this because 'They do their jobs like it is part of their life. They want you to learn' whereas in Nigeria, 'there are a lot of problems like gangs etc. in the universities' and boarding school is often viewed as a means of punishment '3 month jail sentence.' The lecturers too do not care whether you learn or otherwise. The small class sizes, interactive teaching methods in ADP and the assigned group projects have also enabled the informants to take more control of their own learning – 'You get to participate in your classes. I can learn better. They send you to go do this on your own, you go find out and learn.' The academic culture in ADP is also rather infectious and the work ethics is very different compared to that in Nigeria 'You see other students study, you have no choice, you feel guilty. Here I see lots of responsibility in the local students.' Despite the positive response towards the academic culture of ADP, the many differences had made two of the informants experience some confusion and struggle throughout their academic journey in ADP 'it is tough, sometimes I am not sure, because the system is very different.'

### **Of Support and Neglect**

Although the informants remarked that they could get some social support by participating in Extra Curricular Activities (ECAs) the NIS do not participate because 'there aren't many international students who join ECAs' and many of the activities carried out by the ADP clubs and societies do not interest them. The International Office of ADP does not give them any form of support to ease their transition except for taking care of their immigration matters and 'there isn't enough interaction between the international office and the international students.' To start off the 'officers hardly even know the students by name.' The NIS got most of their social support from their co-nationals studying at ADP or in the nearby colleges 'I called my friends...we went out, we just laughed, laughed about the whole thing. I felt taken care of' and a local church 'The church was the first place that I felt welcomed. I never knew Malaysians could be so friendly.'

## **Korean International students (KIS)**

From the interviews with the three Korean students, 70 significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes.

### **Of Strangeness, Expectations & Disillusionment**

The Korean international Students (KIS) are faced with a landslide of novel and strange images, 'different looking people - covered (tudung) ladies', different sounding languages, climatic changes – 'first feeling was very hot' and food that smells and tastes completely different from anything they have ever encountered. One KIS imagined Malaysia to be a fishing community! All this strangeness impacts their consciousness and there is the fear of the unknown, a feeling of confusion. They have to see things from a new vantage point.

### **Of divides and bonds- language**

To speak this or that language is also to assume a culture, so it can divide or bind, facilitate or make life difficult. To the KIS, English is a problem, a challenge which looms large in their lives: English language is their 'biggest problem', the 'happiest thing' is being able to speak English, their friendships are dictated by who will help them speak English, A Korean participant says 'I don't have that many Korean friends because that is not good for my English.' Their time and life is consumed by English as one KIS says 'I spend 6 hour every day doing English and yet I get C.'

Koreans are generally very independent, feel a sense of dependence on others. When their language fails them, the KIS had to depend on senior co-nationals to help them out of a sticky situation. In Korea, grammar is the focus in the teaching of English 'makes them perfect in grammar but their own teachers can't speak good English.' So their conversational English is a source of frustration and anxiety but KIS feel that its better to learn English in Malaysia than in the U.S. because there are many here who are not good at English and so they feel comfortable.

### **Of perception, prejudice & culture**

The KIS are very chauvinistic in their social perception of Malaysians, an informant says, 'I don't feel discriminated because I think like Koreans tend to discriminate others, here is better.' Because of similarity of biological traits, the Koreans in Malaysia are under visible and therefore escape the brunt of prejudices. The KIS savour greater academic and social freedom here – a Korean student says, 'In Korea I just have to follow.'

Their cultural beliefs about the importance of hierarchy inform their respect for the teachers and find the local students to be very rude. The value of success and achievement is so central that other problems just pale into oblivion. The KIS slept only 2 hours a night in the early period, 'weekend were for studying and cleaning' and 'weekdays quite routine.' Beating the odds of poor language skills and other contextual/cultural obstacles they strive uncomplainingly for academic glory, not for them the luxury of feeling lonely or concerns about acceptance etc., their internal locus of control guides them to their goal of success. Characteristically the KIS say 'I don't think about acceptance, it does not matter to me.' Another KIS says, 'local students are helpful for my language and speaking but Koreans help me with my studies.'

Malaysians are disliked for speaking Chinese thus, being culturally insensitive 'it's very annoying' said one KIS. Malaysia is also not seen as being a very safe place and that curtails their freedom. The public transport is considered inefficient and the taxi drivers are perceived as racist 'because he dropped the Caucasian first.'

On the other hand, the KIS enjoy the variety of cuisines and shopping in Malaysia. The female KIS sense that they get male attention because they are pretty, but try 'to be cautious' in their interaction with the local guys.

### **Of challenges and achievements**

Their English handicap sets the tone for their academic experiences, with dictionary by their side they must pre-read, if they have to understand the next days lecture, make tedious preparation to participate in class-

‘I just expect what you want to ask me, so I just prepare everything’ they can never spontaneously ask questions or express themselves (although this preparation reduced with time).”

Their perseverance and endurance is phenomenal perhaps because of the disciplined, rigorous and stressful education system they have gone through – ‘I went to school at 7 o’clock and I come back at 11 pm at night – don’t see their parents on weekdays.’

They find Malaysia good for learning languages and liberal arts but not for maths. They prefer the ADP’s interactive and student-centred teaching methods to the very dictatorial and instructive methods of Korea, ‘actually in Korea, asking question during class time is considered rude.’ Korea has limited (3) good universities – ‘very difficult to enter – but university guarantees their future,’ thus we can imagine the competition and the immense pressure on the Korean students, so they enjoy the freedom, the choices and the more sane / liberal academic culture prevalent in ADP.

### Of Support and Neglect

The Korean students have an ‘internal locus of control’, they are so ‘inner-directed’ that they have minimum expectations of others. They perceived the International office to be generally supportive but complained about a particular officer as being ‘difficult to deal with’ and very ‘hot tempered.’ They appreciate the support provided by the Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS). The Accounting and English PASS sessions particularly claimed their gratitude. Their major complain was about lack of recreational facilities and other activities, both after school and during holidays when they are left to their own devices, clueless and resource less.

Due to the restriction imposed by the conference organizers on the length of the full paper (not more than 10 A4 pages), the results for the two remaining groups of students (Indonesian International Students and Indian International Students) will be presented in condensed tables as follows.

### Indonesian International Student

From the interviews with the three Indonesian students, 62 significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes. Table 3 includes 16 examples of significant statements and their corresponding formulated meanings and themes.

*Table 3 Selected examples of significant statements of Indonesian students, related formulated meanings and themes*

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
There supposed to be someone picking me up at the airport but I cannot find until my mum and I get lost in the airport.	InIS do not feel welcome when they first arrived at KLIA as there was no TUC personnel to greet them.	Of strangeness, expectations & disillusionment
Taylor’s College accommodation, not really good. The condition is not nice. The room, the facilities, furniture bad, dirty and more expensive.	The college accommodation is in poor condition despite the higher rental charges.	
They talk in their Hokkien language... they talk, talk, I feel like an outcast. But once I tell them...they are quite happy to adjust.	InIS feel cut off due to the language divide. But their Malaysian peers are willing to adjust the moment they are made aware.	
I feel that Malaysia is better than Indonesia..... because things are more in order..people are more disciplined..you’ve got a feeling of safety....less dust in air.	InIS prefers Malaysia to Indonesia because the environment here is more systematic, safer, cleaner and people are more disciplined.	Of perceptions, prejudice & culture
Indonesia more discrimination...people don’t mix, Chinese with Chinese,..etc.	The Malaysian environment is less discriminating than the Indonesian environment.	
One lecturer said “why arr all the Indonesians, the grades so bad one?” I think the teacher should not have said that.	InIS are unhappy with the faculty member for stereotyping them as weak students.	
The teaching methods different....here must understand... I just memorize when study in Indonesia...must talk more in class... in Indonesia lecturer seldom ask you question. Lecturer accepts any comments...more free to express thoughts.	The teaching methods here emphasize understanding and participation compared to that in Indonesia...more freedom of expression.	Of challenges & achievements

Lecturers right here very friendly and call you by name. Care a little more whether I understand. Class is more fun, more relaxed	InIS find the faculty to be more caring and the class atmosphere to fun & relaxing.	
They help me a lot because the first time I came here, I think add more people because one person alone, sometimes cannot give so much help.... then can meet often with students.	The International Office staff have been helpful but better contact and services can be offered if more staff were recruited.	Of support & neglect
The Church helped me a lot....I go every week.	The local church is a great source of support for the InIS.	

The disparities between the InIS expectations and experiences cause much disappointment for the InIS in their initial weeks in Malaysia. Language is yet their biggest obstacle and it inhibits their interaction and often makes them feel left out. They have experienced some stereotyping by their local peers and faculty members but express preference for the Malaysian environment as it is safer, cleaner, more systematic and less discriminating. Friendships made here have also been deeper and stronger. Furthermore, the academic culture in ADP despite being different is one that has encourages freedom of expression and the understanding of subject content unlike the rote learning methods which are popular back home (Indonesia). The InIS get much of their support from the local church and the International Office however, they avoid ECA participation altogether.

### Indian International Students

From the interviews with the three Indian students, 73 significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes. Table 4 includes 17 examples of significant statements and their corresponding formulated meanings and themes.

*Table 4 Selected examples of significant statements of Indonesian students, related formulated meanings and themes*

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning	Theme
I was expecting a bigger and nicer campus but ADP only had one floor. Universities like that in my country are called bad universities.	The college campus does not meet the IDS expectations.	Of strangeness, expectations & disillusionment
Room had no lock....scary for me...it was messy, fridge was dirty, it was mucky....At one point I was suspicious and insecure because as I woke up I smelt smoke in my room, which was strange...suspected that my roommate's boyfriend must have entered my room....they even had a big drinking party going on one day. I just stayed in my room.	The IDS are unhappy with the condition of the Taylor's accommodation and also feels insecure about people encroaching on their privacy. The IDS also perceive their peers behaviour as conflicting with their moral values.	
I understand others but people do not understand me. I don't know the way I say or what I say	The IDS are quite fluent in English but her peers often do not understand her.	Of divides and bonds
Locals keep talking amongst themselves in their own language. So I feel lost. I tell them many times to speak in English but they go back to talking in their mother tongue.	The IDS feel isolated because their peers make no effort to keep them in the loop and continue talking in their own language.	
A local Chinese girl looking for a room...her father wanted all Chinese roommates only...when he saw me, started screaming and scolding, "this is an Indian..."	The IDS had a terrible racist experience when a Chinese family openly showed disdain for this Indian with whom their daughter has now to share a room.	Of Perceptions, Prejudice & Culture
I faced problems with my own people. They say cannot wear western clothes, swim or cut hair.	Co-national patronize and dictate the IDS as to what they should wear and that they should not swim or cut their hair.	
I was like cooped up in India. Here I do go out...there I almost never go out.	The IDS savour the freedom they enjoy here as it is the most important change in their lives.	
Group projects were bad. Some members used me to do most of the work.	The IDS finds class projects very messy because there is no way to negotiate a fair distribution of work.	Of challenges & achievements
ADP is quite different. In Bangladesh only 2 exams but here always got test, quiz, project, exam....I did not know that homework is graded because in Bangladesh it is not.	The IDS are not well acquainted with the American system of continuous assessment and initially did not realize that every piece of homework is graded.	
I like to join sports club...but I heard they are not so active.	The IDS perceive most of the sports clubs in ADP to be inactive hence do not participate in ECAs.	Of support & neglect

The students from the Indian subcontinent straddle the new land and culture with angst born out of loneliness. Loneliness for them is like a heartbeat, always present. They moved from a culture of warmth and friendships to feelings of rejection, isolation and neglect because of language, race and culture. They try making friends and they fail. Their expectations of making friends, of enjoyable gregarious times, of good accommodation and a great campus come to a naught. Although they find the American academic system facilitating, non-pressurizing and even interesting, they feel their performance back home would be better and they attribute that to the spirit of camaraderie and long hours of guided revision at school. In spite of this, they enjoyed their new found freedom and the new feeling of self-efficacy.

## **Discussion**

The first part of the discussion section addresses the research question – ‘What is the essence of the adjustment experiences of international students at ADP?’ while the second section addresses the question – What are the differences in socio-cultural and academic adjustment experiences of the Nigerian, Korean, Indonesian and Indian groups of international students enrolled in the ADP.

### **Essence of Adjustment**

To get at the essence of the lived experiences and the life worlds of Nigerian, Korean, Indian and Indonesian international students in Malaysia, we reduce their individual experiences to a description of universal essence. All International students have a felt experience of strangeness (difference), a cognitive dissonance in their expectations and some amount of disillusionment with their new environment.

In their everyday intercultural encounters, every international student grapples with the importance of language (English) whether it is language proficiency or the strange accents of others. Language is not only a vehicle for our thoughts, our thinking is affected by the categories and words available in our language and as the ‘whorfian hypothesis’ puts forward that ‘observers are not led by the same picture of the universe unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar. The divergent realities of the international students create potential for conflicts.

The experiences of the international students are contoured by prejudices and stereotypes – heterostereotypes about others (Africans have low IQ and that’s a fact) and autostereotypes about their own group (we Koreans are better). Prejudices can range from bigotry to racism, in-group to out-group categories, subtle to blatant, identity by color to color blindness amounting to inclusion and exclusion, depending on where they have come from. Such prejudices derived from their interaction with teachers, peers and other Malaysians get coded in their experiences and to some extent redefine them. The world view of their own culture is central to their perceptions of their new environment and so the Nigerians can’t understand the Malaysian food or friendships and the Indians can’t understand the heterosexual relationships or the dress sense of Malaysians. They get trapped (including Malaysians) in these perceptions and are slow to understand and accommodate these cultural differences.

These conditioned perceptions spill over to their academic world with Koreans viewing the academic (especially language) challenges as ‘do or die’ situations and the Nigerians finding the Malaysian students hard working and happy attitude towards studies unfathomable yet infectious and the Indians lamenting the lack of camaraderie among the individualistic Malaysian students. Although all I.S. enjoy the teacher’s caring attitude, the relaxed and interactive atmosphere in classes and most of all the academic and social freedom, yet they perform better in their home countries.

In essence although the experiences of the international students are seen to be negative to some extent, nevertheless they are tenacious to persevere and remain quite upbeat throughout the adjustment process.

### **Comparative analysis**

This study attempts a comparativistic strategy to analyze and explore the cross case differences in the adjustment experiences of a few groups of some international students. Hofstede’s (2001) dimensions of culture: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity and collectivism vs. individualism have been used to extend our understanding of how the different cultural backgrounds influence the students’ experiences here.



The Korean and Indonesian International Students expressed the least amount of discriminating experiences, followed by the international students from India and Nigeria. The Korean and Indonesian (Indonesian Chinese) are the most under-visible because their physical traits are shared by the Malaysian Chinese who are the majority in ADP. The Indian international students also share physical traits with the Malaysian Indians while the Nigerian international students stand out as being markedly different in many existential dimensions - physically, historically and experientially. Those from Korean, in fact have auto stereotypes ('Korean is better and Korean girls feel they are 'seen as pretty'), coming from a 'high power distance' (Hofstede 2001) culture, which accepts inequality, they do not concern themselves with issues of equality and acceptance or get too sensitive about it.

The same is true of the Indonesian and Indian international students but the Indian international students coming from what could be in Hofstede's (2001) terms 'feminine' culture, focus on behaviour patterns such as caring for others, gentleness and consensus-seeking behaviour experience severe angst of loneliness. The Nigerian international students seem to belong more to the 'feminine' culture with ideals of friendship and caring held high and somewhat disdainful of the calculative nature of friendships among the Malaysian ADP students. The Korean culture, being more 'masculine' encourages responsibility, decisiveness, high ambition and achievement. These are very evident among the hard driving Korean students. The Korean students' regard for hierarchy, structure and conformity is indicative of 'high uncertainty avoidance' (Hofstede 2001), the Indonesians, Indians and Nigerians follow respectively on the spectrum.

The behavior patterns of the Korean, Indian, Indonesian and Nigerian international students seem directed by group norms as in collectivist cultures but with some differences. Within the collectivist ethos the Koreans energetically pursue personal goals and remain competitive. Indians tend to be vertical collectivists, seeing each other from power and achievement standpoint, yet desirous of harmony in their social relationships. The Nigerians help their friends unreservedly but also expect others to support them back. The Indonesian Chinese, though obedient to group norms, have not experienced particularly harmonious relationships in their own country and are willing to be assimilated with the local Chinese students.

The mental programming (Hofstede 2001) of the international student is determined by age, biological make-up (universal) and culture (collective). As such they are similar in some ways and divergent in others. That may be why in spite of adjustment problems the lure of greater freedom, away from parental control, keeps them happy here.

## **Implications of the Study**

There are several implications that emerged from this study. Firstly, it is vital to orient the students and all academic and administrative staff in the program to be sensitive to cultural diversity and value cross - cultural differences amongst their students. Open forums and workshops could be held so as to enhance the social acceptability of international students among their peers and faculty members. A strong social network should be in place to support the international students throughout their study period. There might be a need to recruit part- time or full time international student advisors as the international office does not seem to be providing much social and emotional support for these students other than taking care of their immigration matters.

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