

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON FIRST YEAR INDONESIAN STUDENTS'  
EXPERIENCE IN A PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION  
IN KUALA LUMPUR.**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This exploratory study aims to examine first year Indonesian students' transitional experience in Malaysia in order to understand their needs as international students. The data obtained may provide institutions of higher learning with the insiders' perspective to further design and implement programmes with the necessary support systems to facilitate their first-year in Malaysia. Using Schlossberg's Transition Theory as a guiding interview framework, three Indonesian students were selected as the purposeful samples. The qualitative methodology was used to capture the individual and collective experience of these students. Interviews were conducted as the primary data collection technique. The thematic analysis provided three major areas that reflect their experience as first-year students and they are: 1) Transitional Issues of Indonesian Students, 2) Support Resources for Indonesian Students, and 3) Coping Mechanisms of Indonesian Students.*

**Keywords:** *First year experience, internationalisation, student support, transition, higher education, international students, Indonesian students.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Malaysia's Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak on April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2015 announced Malaysia's Education Blueprint 2015-2025 which, further highlights the country's education aims and strategies to become a globalized education hub with world class standards (The Star Online, 2015). In this blueprint, internationalisation was identified as one way to support the main objectives of making Malaysia an excellent education hub.

Some of the very early forms of internationalisation took place when itinerant preachers travelled across the globe to share knowledge and practices about their respective religion. Hence, internationalisation in and of itself is not a new phenomenon. Similarly,

internationalisation of higher education is not a new trend and different accounts across the world had been documented since the 1970's as mentioned by Mazzarol, Soutar and Sim (2003). This study listed Malaysia and Singapore as internationalisation key players in the Asia Pacific region – both in receiving students as well as sending students abroad. Malaysia is keen to enrol more international students as it wants to be a regional hub for international education. This strategic declaration by the authorities may be perceived as a tall order for many higher education institutions in Malaysia. The 2011 Malaysian Internationalisation Policy was crafted with the help of multiple stakeholders. The latter included private higher education institutions (PHEI) which were actively recruiting international students at the time the policy was being worked on. This development included best practices for the recruitment and retention of international students so that they may have a good experience pursuing their tertiary education in this country.

Much research about international students has been conducted abroad in countries such as Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Some of the areas studied include English Language requirements and proficiency, adjustments to the cultural and social contexts, and managing teaching and learning related concerns. However, in Malaysia the research on international students is an ongoing development and it may simultaneously evolve as the number of international students increase in this country. Hence, there is scarcity of research of and about international students.

The purpose of this study is explore the transitional experiences of first-year Indonesian students in a private higher education setting in order to further understand the transition challenges that these students faced and to identify the support services needed. This research only includes Indonesian students because in this PHEI, most international students come from this country.

Malaysia ranked third as the country of destination for higher education for Indonesian students after Australia and the United States respectively (UNESCO, 2014). In 2015, 87,002 international students from 33 different countries were enrolled in private higher education institutions (PHEI) in Malaysia. Indonesia ranked fourth as a sending country where a total of 4,720 Indonesian students enrolled in different PHEI in Malaysia after Bangladesh, Nigeria and China respectively (Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia, 2016). Although this number may seem like a drop in the bucket, PHEI continue to identify Indonesia as a recruiting destination. Clearly, similarities in the spoken language, lifestyles like food and weather would most probably be one of the pull factors for them to choose Malaysia as their tertiary education destination.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What are the transitional issues of first year Indonesian students in higher education in Malaysia?
2. What are the resources and support system that facilitate the transition of first year Indonesian students in higher education in Malaysia?
3. How do first year Indonesian students cope with their transitional experiences in higher education in Malaysia?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The research on internationalisation in higher education includes the analysis of the meaning of internationalisation and its link to globalisation. Some studies looked at the factors that contribute to internationalisation of higher education such as the presence of international students and staff, the existence of internationalisation strategies, the impact of internationalisation, and the development of internationalisation nationally, regionally, and across the globe.

### The Development of Internationalisation

The definition of internationalisation varies greatly in most cited research. The same goes with the concept of internationalisation, as there were many depending on each country's own education policy and the individual institution that decides to embark on it. Study abroad programs, student and faculty exchange, curriculum and qualification franchising, joint ventures between institutions abroad, arrivals of international students to host universities and international research cooperation are all parts of the internationalisation strategies.

Knight (2003) provided an updated working definition of internationalisation at national, sector and institutional levels as, "The process of integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education." (p.2). Internationalisation as a product and a process facilitates the development of global perspectives that will benefit the global market place. Elkin, Farnsworth and Templer (2008) identified nine dimensions of internationalisation, which are:

1. Undergraduate international students
2. Postgraduate international students
3. Student exchanges programs
4. Staff exchanges programs
5. Staff interaction in international context/ attendance at international conferences
6. Internationally focused program of study
7. International research collaborations
8. Support for international students
9. International institutional links

These dimensions are the different facets of internationalisation and institutions of higher learning will develop these areas depending on the resources available to embark on internationalising either from a macro and or micro systems approach. In the minds of students and parents that pay for their children's education, institutions with international presence equates to image and quality (Hammond, 2009).

As cliché as it sounds, the need to internationalise has become a must in view of the current education climate, especially in Malaysia where competition between PHEI is bountiful. Of course, the first and foremost reason in implementing internationalisation strategies is to attract more international students, which translates to more money for the PHEI as all of them are self-financed. In the bigger picture, the challenge is not in attracting these students but in ensuring quality education and meaningful student experience are

provided and developed. As highlighted by Aznur Hajar Abdullah, Shaista Wasiuzzaman, and Rosidah Musa, (2015) many higher education institutions (HEI), be it public or private, in their eagerness to attract international students, missed providing these students a holistic experience where the studying process fulfils academic, cultural and social expectations of the students. The process of internationalisation should not be purely based on the financial rationale alone but must have a distinct educational goal guided by ethical principles and practices (Howe & Martin, 1998).

Singh, Schapper, and Jack (2014), pointed out that the reasons Middle-Eastern students choose Malaysia as their higher education destination are the safety and peaceful context of the country, its Islamic practices, reasonably low cost of tuition and cost of living. The Asian students cited geographical reasons as Malaysia is closer to their home countries. In addition, Malaysia's ethnic diversity is another pull factor for international students who are keen to experience the country's multicultural mix and hence may be drawn to study in this country.

### **Schlossberg's Transition Theory**

Schlossberg's Transition Theory is used as a guide to the conceptual work for this study with the objective of gathering pertinent information to understand the Indonesian students' transition to Malaysia. International students that come to Malaysia came with a set of expectations and experiences academically as well as culturally. In the transition theory by Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995), every adult experiences some sort of transitional period and in this case 'going abroad and studying in a foreign country' and in which some sort of coping and adapting mechanism is applied by the learner. Schlossberg, Waters, and Goodman (1995) describes transition as changes that occur in relationships, routines, assumptions and roles because of an event and or non-event that took place. When a transition occurs, a process takes place and the individual attempts to integrate the change into his or her daily life.

Four aspects of transitions were highlighted that will affect how well an individual deal with change (Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995). They are:

1. Situation – examines features of a transition and how they may influence its significance to the individual
2. Self – involves a person's outlook on life as well as demographics like socio-economic status
3. Support – resources that is available for the individual to utilize
4. Strategies – refers to actions that the individual takes in response to transitions.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The primary methodology undergirding this study is qualitative as its constructivist paradigm allows it to focus on understanding the "what", "how" and "why" questions of a situation. It allows the specific focus on the "digging deep" of the students' experience within the context of where the students are enrolled for their studies and their transitional experiences during their first-year. The phenomenological approach guides the development

of this initial study as the experiences of the student were explored and thematically described. In addition, this phenomenological approach looked into the essence of the lived experiences of the students' in the natural setting of being international Indonesian students in Malaysia. This allows the construction of an understanding of their transitional experiences of their first-year of studies.

### **Sample**

Purposeful sampling was employed for this study as the participants must have the experience of being new international students in their first year of studies in Malaysia. Then, they are able to provide the insiders' perspective of their lived experiences as new students at the institution of higher learning. Hence, the sample of three first semester Indonesian students were purposefully selected as they were first year students at the time this initial study was conducted.

### **Data collection tool and procedure**

The researcher as an instrument in the study is one of the characteristics of qualitative research. In order to obtain thick and rich information individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016) interviewing in a research context is an activity that is systematic. Semi-structured interviews allow the questions to be used in a more flexible manner where certain structured questions are in place in order to attain the required information while other questions may be asked if an area of interest arises during the interview.

The three Indonesian students were initially approached through an e-mail communication. The purpose of the study was briefly described. Individual appointments were later made to conduct the face-to-face interviews. The informed consent form was made available to the students and confidentiality of the information provided was assured. The students signed their respective informed consent form. Permission was sought prior to the conducting the interview to audio-tape the session. This process was implemented to maintain the rigour of the data collection procedure.

### **Data analysis procedure**

The verbatim transcription of the interviews started with the first student. It is important in the data analysis process to start analysing from the first interview as this allows the researcher who is the instrument to obtain an initial discovery of the students' lived experience as new international students. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) proposed that qualitative data analysis is an inductive and comparative process. The first interview provides descriptions of one student's experience and when the second interview is transcribed and analysed in comparison with the first, a comparative process takes place. Similarly, the same process applies to the third interview. The data analysis task includes the consolidating of data through a reduction process that seeks to code, categorise and eventually identify themes that can provide descriptions of the selected students' experience of transitioning to Malaysia as international students.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There analysed data can be categorised into three main areas or themes. They are Transitional Issues of Indonesian Students, Support Resources for Indonesian Students, and Coping Mechanisms of Indonesian Students. There three themes are supported by several sub-themes.

### **Theme 1: Transitional Issues of Indonesian Students**

The transitional issues experienced by the students can be described as a cycle that starts before they enter Malaysia and being at the university and its environment. The main issues include adhering to Malaysia's requirements for enrolling and entering the country where English language requirements are imposed as well as obtaining the visa to enter as international students. Upon their arrival at the university, the students had to cope with a plethora of issues that include socio cultural and academic concerns.

#### *Language Requirements*

The Indonesian students focused on achieving the IELTS requirement as well as practising the language prior to joining the institution in Malaysia. Student 1 (S1) said, "Before I come here I join my English practise with my friends in Surabaya for a month. Then, I join IELTS test for this university, then after that it's about 3 months before I go here." Similarly, S3 pointed out, "I study IELTS in my hometown and I have test and I pass the IELTS test as well, so before I go, before I went to Malaysia yeah I went confidentially come here."

#### *Immigration Requirements*

The students in Indonesia may have to apply for their visa to enter Malaysia through certain immigration offices in bigger cities. Such is the case for one of the students who had to ensure that the student visa was obtained in a timely manner prior to entering Malaysia. S3 said, "Things like my documentation of course, the study visa ahh I need to apply in the capital of Indonesia in Jakarta and I need to wait for it." For those who live in Jakarta, which is the capital of Indonesia this may not pose a problem.

#### *Socio cultural and academic concerns*

Some of the concerns encountered are managing a foreign currency as well their finances as they are keen to explore their new environment. S3 said, "The difficulty in here is to maintain my money, yeah but in here there is so many interesting places to visit so I need to spend more money but as the students as a like foreigner I need to save it, by now I can save it well." Similarly, S4 said, "At the first time is hard to manage the money because the currency is different, more saving money here." Other adjustments include getting used to a different academic system where the teaching and learning methods may be different from that experienced in Indonesia. S3 said, "I have to know more about this place. Maybe in my

hometown, in my country its different style of teaching than there... so I have to adopt more to do my assignment.”

## **Theme 2: Support Resources for Indonesian Students’ Transition**

These new international students relied on several support resources such as their local and international peers, university staff and by engaging with activities coordinated by the university.

### *Peer support*

The students sought the assistance of peers within “close proximity” and they are their flatmates, local and other international students in the university. S3 said, “At the very beginning at the very first week I feel like a little bit homesick but my friends my house mate and also my classmates and all other friendly people here at the university here of course support me as well. I enjoy in very first semester, I enjoy I feel like I just study in my hometown.” Other international friends who may have experienced similar transition issues provided assistance to S2 who said, “My card didn’t have enough money to print, but the Korean boy helped me to print, and then the Korean girl show how to go to teachers office, that time was like hmm 6 o clock almost 5.57and they really help me a lot.”

### *University support*

The international students’ encounter with the university staff begins at the point of application but when they arrive into the country the assistance from both the students’ services and or international office is usually the point of contact. This is due to the services provided by these offices that include airport pickup, orientation, checking into the accommodation and providing the necessary items and information that assist students to “settle in” so that they can prepare for their first semester in Malaysia. S4 said, “First from the International Student Service, first they tell me where is the place I live and then nearby food, and how the rules in the university and everything like the people and everything, like people act and the students here.”

Organised activities that help international students to be more familiar with the place they live in, is another form of assistance that helped with their transition to the city. S1 said, “For more helpful when I go, I want to go somewhere them I am joining the Kuala Lumpur (KL) tour with Ms XXX, then I know how to go there, by monorail or something like that, I feel more easier after I am joining the KL Tour.”

## **Theme 3: Coping Mechanisms of International Students’ Transition**

Similar to other first-year students, these international students had to learn to manage their transition into their programme of studies in a new country, new environment and new academic system. The coping mechanisms of these new international students include establishing personal social support group and developing one’s self-reliance.

### *Establishing personal social support group*

During the first-semester, these students find more comfort in being with other international students and fellow countrymen after a certain period of time. This may be due to the context of being international students in a foreign country. There is a common understanding that they are going through similar adjustment experiences as international students. S3 said, “I think as international students they feel like they have same feeling as me so they need to get friendship more and more. Yeah I am friend with a lot of friends and most are international.” Another student found support from other Indonesian students. This student said, “My friend from Indonesia assisted other, so we can help each other knowing how to adopt and anything. Actually I am not that easy to socialize with other people with different culture. For me I better friend with my Indonesian friend but its ok to friend with local people that cannot get very very close” (S4).

### *Developing self-reliance*

The international students learned to develop their individual ways of learning to be self-reliant in a new environment and culture. They learned to seek information that helps to clarify any concerns that may arise in and or outside the classroom. S1 said, “I will discuss about what my problem, what make me challenge. If I can handle by myself then handle, if I cannot, I will discuss with another person. Like when I want to go someplace then I don’t know where or how to go there. Then I ask some senior.” A student commented on having to live away from home and learning to live independently, “I live with my parents so they provide you like a meal, everything the transportation. Here you live alone you must like defend yourself in here, you must know how to act yourself” (S4). Another student commented on the need to be more engaged with the university community at large. The student said, “May be next semester I want join some organization need to like know about the university, university life first” (S3).

## **Implications and Recommendations**

Most PHEI in Malaysia are eager to recruit more international students as the local market may be saturated. However, recruiting these students to Malaysia has to be accompanied with resources and support services that assist the students to call Malaysia their temporary home and to attain academic success. Understanding the transition and the intra cultural issues are helpful as one may think that the Indonesian culture share similarities with the Malaysian culture. However, cultural differences do exist. Hence, an intentionally designed programme to capture the transition cycle and address adjustment issues may assist these students to cope with their stay in Malaysia socially and academically.

## **CONCLUSION**

The research on international students has been an ongoing work for the past few decades. However, the work has just started in Malaysia with the government’s strategic plan to develop the country as a regional hub for international education. Existing frameworks and best practices are documented but regional contexts may differ.



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