

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

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia has had a degree of success in establishing itself as a regional education hub in recent years and private higher education institutions are significant players that dominate the international student market because more than 50% of the international student population in Malaysia is enrolled in these institutions. The phenomenon of adjustment has not been studied extensively in the Malaysian setting. Therefore, this study sets out to investigate the essence of socio-cultural and academic adjustment experiences of international students in an established private higher education institution. The informants of this study comprised 21 international students from 7 countries. A multiple case study design was adopted. The semi-structured interview method of data collection was employed. The interviews were then recorded and transcribed verbatim. The themes were then captured in phenomenologically sensitive descriptions which resonate with the experiences of the international students – of strangeness, expectations and disillusionment, of divides and bonds, of perceptions, prejudice and culture, of challenges and achievements and of social support and neglect. Hofstede's cultural dimensions were used to explore cross-case study differences in adjustment experiences and the dissonance they create for the individual and institution.

Keywords: Academic adjustment, international students, phenomenology, socio-cultural adjustments

1. 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 of December 2008, the number of international students in Malaysian public and private higher education institutions and schools was 66 000; this number includes 14 000 international students in public universities and 33 600 international students in private higher education institutions (*Malaysian Insider*, 2010). 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, educators in higher education institutions in Malaysia still do not have access to a body of

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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 an established private higher education institution (PHEI) 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 to the pursuit of 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 in finding their way around new cultures and of 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 *et al.*, 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).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

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 adopted the phenomenological approach and focused on the socio-cultural and academic adjustment experiences of international students enrolled in 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: 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 and Shan, 2007; Zhang, 2002), mismatch of cultural values (Mehdizadeh and Scott, 2005; Talbot *et al.*, 1999; Major, 2005; Wang and Shan, 2007), discomfort with the new physical environment (Searle and

Ward, 1990; Talbot *et al.*, 1999), difficulty and frustration in establishing friendships and relationships (Searle and Ward 1990; Wang and Shan, 2006; Lewthwaite, 1996), low participation in social events and leisure activities (Mehdizadeh and Scott, 2005; Wang and Shan, 2007), discrimination and stereotyping (Talbot *et al.*, 1999), lack of practical social support (Mehdizadeh and Scott 2005; Burns, 1991), accommodation difficulties (Burns, 1991; Lin and Yi, 1997), dietary restrictions (Lin and 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 styles (Stoynoff 1997; Major 2005; Zhang 2002; Lewthwaite 1996; Mehdizadeh & Scott 2005), different relationships 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), and inadequate language proficiency levels (Lewthwaite 1996).

The analysis of the above mentioned socio-cultural and academic adjustment factors will be attempted using Geert Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions as a guiding instrument to provide some insight into the cultural differences of the international students. Although the initial phase of this very large scale research was done using IBM employees in 64 countries, in subsequent phases it also used students from 23 countries. The many studies were integrated to validate 4 independent dimensions of culture, with a fifth dimension added later. These were:

1. Power Distance Index(PDI)
2. Individualism (IDV)
3. Masculinity(MAS)
4. Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI)
5. Long term Orientation.(LTO)

PDI – Power distance is the extent to which the powerful members of organisation and institutions accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. It suggests that a society's level of inequality is endorsed by the followers as much as by the leaders.

IDV – Individualism on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, that is, the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side, we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.

MAS – Masculinity versus its opposite, femininity, refers to the distribution of roles between the genders which is another fundamental issue for any society to which a range of solutions are found.

UAI – Uncertainty avoidance deals with a society's tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; it ultimately refers to man's search for truth. It indicates to what extent

a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations.

LTO – *Long-term versus short-term orientation: this fifth dimension was found in a study among students in 23 countries around the world, using a questionnaire designed by Chinese scholars. It can be said to deal with Virtue regardless of truth. Values associated with long term orientation are thrift and perseverance, values associated with short term orientation are respect for tradition, fulfilling social obligations and protecting one's face.*

In order to understand the adjustment concerns and problems of international students as influenced by their culture and their background, the study is informed by the following questions: (1) What is the essence of the adjustment experiences of international students in the chosen PHEI? and (2) What are the differences in socio-cultural and academic adjustment experiences of the Nigerian, Korean, Indonesian, Indian, Myanmar, Maldives and Mongolian groups of international students enrolled in the chosen PHEI?

3. 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 world of international students (IS), 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) was adopted. The criterion based sampling technique was employed and a sample of 21 international students (IS) – 3 students each from 7 countries (Nigeria, Korea, Indonesian, India, Myanmar, Maldives and Mongolia) were selected. The criteria that each of the subjects had to fulfil was as follows: (1) Enrolled as an international student in the PHEI; (2) Have been in the PHEI for more than 6 months; and (3) Was able to articulate their lived experiences in the English language. The persons who met the inclusion criteria were then approached and asked to participate. Interviews were conducted over four months at a specified site. Each informant was then subjected to an in-depth interview lasting 1 hour each. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The researchers then adopted 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 were 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) was 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 were then clustered into themes allowing for the emergence of themes common to all of the participants' transcripts.

4. RESULTS

Significant statements were extracted from the 21 verbatim transcripts 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.

4.1. Nigerian International Students (NIS)

From the interviews with the three Nigerian students, the following were the significant statements extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes. Table 1 includes 12 examples of significant statements and their corresponding formulated meanings and themes.

The Nigerian international students (NIS) are made several promises by the agent who when recruiting tells them that Asians are very warm and Malaysia is a beautiful country. However, none of the expectations stood the test of reality; in fact the reality that they are faced with upon arrival is quite the opposite. Language accent too does pose problems for the NIS. The NIS can understand and be understood by their Malaysian Indian peers and lecturers but 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. Friendships are difficult to initiate and maintain in the local setting because of the difference in cultural script. Food is also a problem for the NIS who find Malaysian food unappetizing. The academic culture is educative, happy, interactive and energetic. The lecturers contributed greatly to this. The small class sizes, interactive teaching methods and the assigned group projects have also enabled the informants to take more control of their own learning. The NIS do not get much support from the international office and neither do they take part in any extra curricular activities.

4.2 Korean International Students (KIS)

From the interviews with the three Korean students, the following significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes. Table 2 includes 12 examples of significant statements and their corresponding formulated meanings and themes.

The Korean international students (KIS) are faced with a landslide of novel and strange images, 'different looking people, different sounding languages, climatic changes and food that smells and tastes completely different from anything they have ever encountered. To the KIS, English is a problem, a challenge which looms large in their lives. Their friendships

Table 1. Selected examples of significant statements of Nigerian students, related formulated meanings and themes

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Theme
The TUC personnel was not there to greet us...he overslept or forgot I don't know...it was so cold in KLIA, I had to sleep the night at the airport. I started missing home, if I had a return ticket, I would have gone back the same day	The NIS expectation of a warm welcome turns out to be quite the opposite when no one is present to greet them.	Of strangeness, expectations & disillusionment
Are we in the right place? Check my CD whether it is the same place... just one floor, there is no place to sit around and socialise and have fun. Even my friend mocks me about the size of the library	The college premises is not as depicted in the demo CD. Friends from another private college in M'sia tease her about her matchbox size college library.	
I get along well with the local Indians. I find it very easy to follow what they are saying.	The NIS face no language barriers when interacting with the local Indians, thus interacting well with this group.	Of divides and bonds
When my Chinese peers speak English, I hear Chinese - hard to understand them and the Malays.	The unfamiliar accents inhibits social interaction and understanding with certain ethnic groups in Malaysia	
I was not accepted. One of my classmates actually asked me whether it is true that there are monkeys, camels, donkeys and elephants on the streets in my hometown	The NIS perceive their Malaysian peers to be culturally ignorant about and insensitive toward Nigeria and Nigerians.	Of perceptions, prejudice & culture
In Nigeria, if you had a friend, they could do a lot for you. But here, as much as they may be friends, you take care of yourself. Even if it is 20cents they want it back from you. To the last change they want it - so calculative (money conscious)	The expectations that come with friendships are different in Nigeria than what the NIS observe and experience in Malaysia. In Nigeria, friends are more responsible for each other whereas here friends tend to be rather individualistic and calculative.	
Malaysian food is too sweet. Chinese food is ...so tasteless. So, I cook at home	The undesirable taste of Malaysian cuisine has made the NIS cook their own meals	

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Table 1. Continued

Significant Statements	Formulated Meaning	Theme
I've never felt like learning was such a happy experience but then seeing the students here come to school so happy, so energetic; it is like what they want to do.	The NIS find the academic culture in the programme to be a rather happy and energising one in contrast to what happens in their educational institutions back home.	Of challenges & achievements
They do their jobs like it is part of their life. They want you to learn. Back home, there are a lot of problems like gangs etc. and the lecturers too do not care whether you learn or otherwise.	The faculty's dedication and nurturing attitude helps the NIS learn more effectively.	
You see other students study, you have no choice, you feel guilty so you have to study too. Here I see a lot of responsibility in the students.	The IS finds the academic culture of TUC educative.	
There isn't much interaction between the international office and international students. The officers hardly even recognise the students by name.	The International Office does not provide much support for the NIS.	Of support & neglect
I'll end up being the only African there in the club so I do not join. Most of the time when I go for club meetings, I hardly see any African or international students, it is just me.	The NIS do not join ECAs because not many of the international students join clubs and societies.	

are dictated by who will help them speak English. The Koreans in Malaysia are not very visible and therefore escape the brunt of prejudices. Their cultural beliefs about the importance of hierarchy shape their respect for teachers and tend to find the local students very rude. Their value of success and achievement is so central that other problems just pale into oblivion. Their perseverance and endurance is phenomenal perhaps because of the disciplined, rigorous and stressful education system they are subjected to. They find Malaysia good for learning languages and the liberal arts but not for maths. They prefer the interactive and student-centred teaching methods to the very dictatorial and instructive methods of Korea. The Korean students have an 'internal locus of control', they are so 'inner-directed' that they have minimum expectations of others. Their major complain was about the lack of recreational facilities and activities, both after school and during holidays when they are left to their own devices, clueless and resourceless.

Table 2. Selected examples of significant statements of Korean students, related formulated meanings and themes

Significant Statements	Formulated Meaning	Theme
I realised that there are a lot of people who have different appearances, different languages and different experiences	The KIS are faced with strangeness or newness in experiences, appearances and languages.	Of strangeness, expectations & disillusionment
I thought Malaysia was a fishing community until I came here and found out that they even had their own car company	The KIS had imagined Malaysia to be a fishing community	
Our English teachers make us perfect in grammar but they can't speak good English.	The KIS is good at grammar but faces obstacles when it comes to expressing themselves in the English language	Of divides and bonds
It is better to learn English here, there are many here who are not good at English compared to if we go straight to the USA	The KIS feel that it is better to learn English in Malaysia than in the USA because there are many here who are not good at English and so they feel comfortable	
I don't have that many Korean friends because that is not good for my English and although I spend 6 hours every day doing English, I still get a C.	Their friendships are dictated by who will help them speak English. Their time and life is consumed by English	
Since I am Korean, I enjoy some benefit. Many others treat me very kindly so I like it. But if I had gone to America straight from Korea, I wouldn't feel these things, I might be discriminated but here I am ok	The KIS feel their nationality is an advantage as they are treated well by the Malaysia but feel they might be discriminated if they had gone to the USA	Of perceptions, prejudice & culture
I don't feel discriminated here because I think Koreans tend to discriminate others; here it is better.	The Koreans in Malaysia are not very visible and therefore escape the brunt of prejudices.	
The local students treat their lecturer like their friend. They talk while the lecturer is talking. I find this disruptive and rude	The KIS does not approve of the way in which their local peers treat their lecturers	

Table 2. Continued

Significant Statements	Formulated Meaning	Theme
I love food here! Shopping is so much better. ...a lot of stuff and things are better and cheaper.	The KIS enjoy the variety of cuisines and shopping in Malaysia	Of perceptions, prejudice & culture
The teaching methods are actually very different. It is good - small classes, individual attention. The Korean style is to just follow. Actually, in Korea, asking questions during class time is considered rude.	The KIS appreciate the change in the teaching method offered by TUC – unlike the less interactive approach employed in the Korean classroom	Of challenges and achievements
Here it is so dangerous that we are not allowed to go out at night and many people are usually at home	Malaysia is also not seen as being a very safe place and that curtails their freedom.	Of support & neglect
It is very boring. There is nothing to do. Most students go home directly after their classes.	There is a lack of recreational facilities and other activities, both after school and during holidays	

4.3 Indonesian International Student (InIS)

From the interviews with the three Indonesian students, the following significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes. Table 3 includes 10 examples of significant statements and their corresponding formulated meanings and themes.

The disparities between the InIS expectations and experiences caused 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 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 participation altogether in extra curricular activities.

4.4 Indian International Students (IDS)

From the interviews with the three Indian students, the following significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes. Table 4 includes 10 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 was supposed to be someone picking me up at the airport but I could not find the person and my mum and I get lost in the airport.	InIS did 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 is not really good. The condition is not nice. The room, the facilities and furniture are not good, 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.	Of divides & bonds
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
In 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 do all the Indonesians, have poor grades?” 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 are different....here must understand... I just memorise when I study in Indonesia...must talk more in class... in Indonesia, the lecturer seldom asks you questions. Lecturers here accept any comments...more free to express thoughts.	The teaching methods here emphasise 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 be fun and relaxing.	

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Table 3. continued

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
They helped me a lot because this was my first visit to Malaysia,. I think more people are needed in the office because one person alone, sometimes cannot give much help.... then they 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.	

Table 4. Selected examples of significant statements of Indian students, related formulated meanings and themes

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
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 when 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 one day. I just stayed in my room.	The IDS are unhappy with the condition of the Taylor's accommodation and also feel 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- perhaps it is the way I say or what I say	The IDS are quite fluent in English but here 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.	

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Table 4. Continued

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
A local Chinese girl was looking for a room...her father wanted all Chinese roommates only...when he saw me, he 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, I cannot wear western clothes, swim or cut hair.	Co-nationals patronising and dictating to 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, we only have 2 exams but here, we always get tests, quizzes, projects, exams....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 realise 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 tried making friends and failed. Their expectations of making friends, of enjoyable gregarious times, of good accommodation and a great campus had come to a naught. Although they find the American academic system facilitating, non-pressurising 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.

4.4 Myanmar International Students (MYI)

From the interviews with the three Myanmar students, the following significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes. Table 5 includes 11 examples of significant statements and their corresponding formulated meanings and themes.

In recounting their expectations, the Myanmar international students (MYI) express dissatisfaction and feel cheated due to the exorbitant charges that they have had to pay for substandard accommodation facilities unlike the 'hotel standard' accommodation initially promised by the recruiting agents. They also experienced an unanticipated status change (viewed as inferior) on the very day they landed as they were interrogated aggressively by enforcement officers at the KL international airport. The culture shock that hit them in the initial weeks plunges them into an abyss of loneliness and even as they try in vain to establish some communication or contact with the locals, the language barrier, unfamiliar non verbal cues, impersonal and independent nature of the locals prove to be too much of an obstacle. Although their academic transition has not been very smooth, they appreciate the freedom of information, faculty members and the teaching and learning approaches that have been accorded to them in the local scene as these have helped them become more open-minded and in general more self-regulated learners. They are appreciative of the services provided by the international office but have yet to participate in any of the extra curricular activities organised by the student services department.

4.5 Maldives International Students (MI)

From the interviews with the three Maldives students, the following significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes. Table 6 includes 11 examples of significant statements and their corresponding formulated meanings and themes.

The new learning environment requires the international students from the Maldives to adjust to a multiracial society, the different language accents, accept the reduced campus size, impersonal attitudes from their local Chinese peers, different food (gastronomic appeal) and the ethnic jokes in daily conversations. These are not major stumbling blocks for the Maldivian students but they do force the students to renegotiate their own lifestyles and work frames. The academic climate is one that they find to be nurturing and stimulating; with qualified and dedicated faculty to the extent the students are able to observe a positive change in their learning approaches. They are also satisfied with the services rendered by the international office; however, like other international groups of students, they do not participate in ECA activities

4.6 Mongolian International Students

From the interviews with the three Mongolian students, the following significant statements were extracted. Arranging the formulated meanings into clusters resulted in 5 themes. Table 7 includes 11 examples of significant statements and their corresponding formulated meanings and themes.

Table 5. Selected examples of significant statements of Myanmar students, related formulated meanings and themes

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
In the first two weeks, I felt a bit lonely, isolated. It was a cultural shock to me. Back in Myanmar we would greet each other when we meet, but over here, they usually use non-verbal gestures. In Myanmar that would be considered rude	The culture shock causes the MYI to be overcome with a sense of loneliness.	Of strangeness, expectations & disillusionment
In the given brochures, the accommodation looked like a hotel, but when I got here, it was run down - definitely disappointing. The accommodation fees are quite high compared to outside and with the money we are paying, we should be getting better facilities and services.	The MYI feel that they have been short changed and have not got their money's worth in relation to the accommodation facility provided by TUC.	
Since we hold Myanmar passports, people here look down on us. We were questioned a lot by the immigration officers just as we landed	Malaysians do not accord much regard for Myanmar nationals. They are subjected to much interrogation.	
When we first arrived, we did not understand the language, even when people speak in English and they did not understand us. The language situation is very different; in Myanmar there has been only one medium used which is Burmese, but here people speak Chinese or Malay and English.	The different accents (of English) created a communication breakdown between the Myanmar people and the locals. The variety of languages spoken also posed challenges and confused international students as they are used to a monolingual society.	Of divides and bonds
I feel that Myanmar people (small town) are more friendly but city people (in Malaysia), they just mind their own business – very impersonal	The MYI find the locals impersonal and unfriendly.	Of perceptions, prejudice & culture
Burmese food and Malay food are quite similar but I don't know how to place an order in Malay, so I have some problems with that.	The local cuisine (Malay food) does seem a little similar, however, the MYI find the act of 'ordering' a challenge.	

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Table 5. Continued

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
Young adults here are more independent, we've always had our parents. Like even now, if I'm going somewhere for the weekend, I would have to inform my parents.	The MYI feels that the locals are more self-reliant whereas they (MYIs) are still obligated to seek permission from parents when there is decision making involved.	Of perceptions, prejudice & culture
In Myanmar, the teachers spoon-fed us. A lot of memorising, and rote-learning. Here, it's a bit different. I study better. We have many projects, assignments and activities. Even though the assignments do not contribute to the grades, but feel I learn more this way.	The focus on student centred learning in Malaysia as opposed to the teacher centred or rote learning approach in Malaysia has enabled the MYI to become a better learner.	Of challenges & achievements
I found it a bit difficult to cope initially and my grades went down but I probably know more things than I did before. Definitely have more access to the Internet. In Myanmar, there are a lot of restrictions. So now I feel more open-minded.	Despite the initial hiccups, the MYI feels that he has learned more and is more receptive to new ideas, the increased access to reading materials, newspapers and the Internet in Malaysia.	
The international office helped with most of the administrative issues; accommodation, banks, visas. But they did not, when it came to social issues.	The international office looks into all administrative related issues but the MYI has to resolve all social issues by themselves.	Of support & neglect
I do not participate in any ECA activities. Other Myanmar students do not participate either.	The MYI do not take to any of the ECA activities organised by the student services of TUC.	

Table 6. Selected examples of significant statements of Maldives students, related formulated meanings and themes

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
I didn't know that there were three main races that made up the demographics of the society.... back in Maldives, there were just Maldivians.	The multiracial atmosphere in Malaysia is a new experience for the MI.	Of strangeness, expectations & disillusionment
The main campus of TUC reminded me of a high school, while I was expecting a whole campus environment - a lot bigger, better facilities, like proper campus grounds because they always say Taylor's is an expensive school, it is reputable etc.	The MI feel short changed by the size and facilities available at TUC.	
I don't have much of a problem speaking English, but sometimes I find it difficult to understand because of the people's accents here. But it was ok after a few weeks.	The MI are quite fluent in English but their peers initially did not understand them and vice versa due to the different accents.	Of divides and bonds
Here in ADP, the Chinese students are not really friendly as compared to the Malays. The Chinese students would often stick to their groups and assume dominant roles.	The dominant and cliquish nature of the local Chinese students posed some challenge hence, breaking the ice took more effort.	Of perceptions, prejudice & culture
I wasn't used to eating out so I lost a lot of weight during my first semester. But after that, I got used to it. And now sometimes, I have second helpings of Malaysian food.	Eating out is a new experience and the MI did miss home cooked meals initially but has become well adjusted to Malaysian cuisine over time.	
I noticed people here tend to make jokes about race and religion, they can make comparisons about their skin colour.	MI is surprised that stereotyping and racial remarks are part and parcel of daily conversations amongst the locals.	
The education offered here is much better than at home. The lecturers are better; they know their subject matter well; they are more experienced and also friendly and approachable. When I need to talk to them, they're there.	The MI are convinced that the quality of education offered in Malaysia is much better than that back home; most of the lecturers are more knowledgeable, professional, dedicated and caring.	Of challenges & achievements

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Table 6. Continued

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
The assignments given here are different; back home we don't have projects; it was mostly independent learning. I like the TUC system better	The MI appreciates/prefers the collaborative learning approach at TUC compared to the independent learning system back home	Of challenges & achievements
I think I've changed as a student. I've improved in terms of results. I'm more motivated because I'm here as a full-time student, and the environment encourages me to study harder. I have more focus.	The MI attributes the conducive environment for his better performance, motivation and focus	
They (Taylor's International Office) were very helpful from the start. They called me even before I got here asking if I required their services. I am thoroughly happy with the service	The MI is happy with the services provided by the International Office	Of support & neglect
There hasn't been much information offered. I've not been to the ECA Centre.	The MI feels that the information on ECAs is inadequate; thus has not made any effort to visit the ECA Centre.	

The Mongolian international students do have to make many adjustments ranging from the climate, language, food, negative perceptions, feelings of isolation and non-acceptance to some amount of prejudice especially outside campus as well as safety concerns. The requirements of the education system are a source of continuous stress because of language, different teaching methods, expectations of independent work, the demands of a continuous assessment system and the practice of group work. They get limited support from the International Student Office. They have no one to turn to in times of sickness and resort to wanting to go home to recover. Despite these problems or because of these problems and heavy expenses incurred, they are more diligent here than in Mongolia. They sum up their experience in Malaysia as not being 'great' but not 'bad' either. The very same sentiment is reflected in 'would return only to travel'.

5. DISCUSSION

The first part of the discussion section addresses the research question – 'What is the essence of the adjustment experiences of international students in the chosen PHEI?' while the second section addresses the question – What are the differences in socio-cultural and

Table 7. Selected examples of significant statements of Mongolian students, related formulated meanings and themes

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
I do not like the Malaysian weather very much; it is very hot. That is because I have a skin allergy that reacts to extreme heat as in this weather.	Discomfort of hot climate and an allergic skin condition.	Of strangeness, expectation & disillusionment
The first time I came here, I did not know much English. I did not know what my teachers were teaching. I did not know how to ask a proper question in English.	Experienced frustration as he was not able to talk, understand or argue because of language handicap.	Of divides and bonds
Sometimes I am mistaken for a Chinese and they start talking to me in Mandarin.	Appearance is a significant factor.	Of perceptions, prejudice & culture
There were these five men who wanted to rob me, they assaulted me with a knife.	Safety is a concern.	
I like going to night clubs to dance and there were these Malaysian Chinese who pushed me when I was dancing on the stage.	Experience of bullying in recreational places.	
I don't feel accepted by everyone - I understand some Chinese and I knew they were bad mouthing me.	Acceptance is experienced as a problem.	
The first thing I did was to join the language centre but then I had to go back to Mongolia and when I came back I had forgotten everything.	Language proves to be a challenge.	Of challenges & achievements
In Mongolia, I felt comfortable so I did not work so hard but here I realise my parents are spending a lot of money on my education, so I should study.	They work harder in Malaysia as compared to back home.	

Continued on next page

Table 7. Continued

Significant Statements	Formulated Meanings	Themes
The education is quite different; here it is more independent study. In Mongolia the lecturers monitor you but here I am responsible for my grades. I also find it difficult to cope with the continuous assessment system; I could not understand that in the first and second semesters. The first semester was very hard for me. Some of the Mongolian students went back because they could not cope.	Comparatively, studying here seems more challenging because; there's more responsibility on the part of the students and we find it difficult to cope with continuous assessment and are not used to group work.	Of challenges & achievements
In Mongolia, we never do group work but it seems quite beneficial.		

academic adjustment experiences of the Nigerian, Korean, Indonesian, Indian, Maldivian, Mongolian and Myanmar groups of international students enrolled in the TUC.

5.1 Essence of Adjustment

To get at the essence of the world of lived experiences and life of Nigerian, Korean, Indian Indonesian, Maldivian, Mongolian and Myanmar international students in Malaysia, we reduced their individual experiences to a description of universal essence. All International students have experienced strangeness (difference), a cognitive dissonance in their expectations and some amount of disillusionment with their new environment. Ward (2002) has also noted a large gap between expectations and experiences. This disorientation is somewhat akin to a 'culture shock'. A Maldivian international student exclaims "back home there are only Maldivians, but here there are so many races!"

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 Myanmar international students are distressed and confused by the many languages spoken here: Chinese, Malay, Tamil, Hindi and English, not to mention the many dialects. There are many implications on proficiency in the host culture's language outside the classroom especially in facilitating friendship networks of ISs. They are desirous of establishing such relationships but experience a lot of difficulties

mostly because of language. The Mongolian international student laments 'I don't have that many good friends for two semesters and so I was hanging out with Mongolians from other colleges'; the IS admitted being very lonely. The international students, generally experience a lack of support except for very legal and formal matters and thus they seek out other co-nationals for socio-psychological needs.

The experiences of the international students are contoured by prejudices and stereotypes – heterostereotypes about others (Africans have low IQ) and auto-stereotypes 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 colour to colour 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 redefines them; for example, the intensive interrogation of Myanmar international students by the Malaysian immigration officers remains etched in their minds that Malaysians looked down upon them. The world view of the international students' own culture is central to their perceptions of their new environment and so the Nigerians cannot understand the Malaysian food or friendships and the Indians cannot 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 cultural responses and 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. The Myanmar and Mongolian international students specifically and more generally all the other international students compare the Malaysian education system with the education system in their home countries and favour the Malaysian education system. Although all international students enjoy the teacher's caring attitude, the relaxed and interactive atmosphere in classes and most of all the academic and social freedom, yet they believe they may have performed better in their home countries.

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

5.2 Comparative Analysis

This study attempts a comparativistic strategy to analyse and explore cross-case differences in the adjustment experiences of international students. This cross-cultural analysis makes some use of Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity vs. femininity and collectivism vs. individualism and even long term orientation to develop insight into the cultural differences and how these influence the students' experiences here.

The Korean international students express the least amount of discriminating experiences and the Nigerian international students experience the least amount of

acceptance. The Korean, Indonesian (Chinese), Mongolian and Myanmar international students are somewhat undervisible because of their physical similarities with the Malaysian Chinese while the Indian and Maldivian international students are often mistaken for Malaysian Indians. On the other hand, the Nigerian international students stand out as being markedly different in many existential dimensions - physically, historically and experientially. From the perspective of Hofstede's classification, the Asian cultures correlate very highly with power distance index so that they accept and expect inequality as part of every day life which may render them less perceptive of discriminating behaviour. It is to be recognised, though, that there is much heterogeneity among the Asian cultures, for example, the Korean culture ranks much lower on Power distance index than for instance Indian and Indonesian. The auto-stereotypes of Koreans ('Korean is better') instead of the hetero-stereotypes against the others, are evidence of this difference. The lower ranking of Nigerians on Power distance makes them more sensitive and less accepting of discriminating gestures than others.

Another point of difference impacting the behaviour of international students could be the differential rankings of the various cultures on Uncertainty avoidance index (UAI). Once again most of the Asian cultures for example, India and Indonesia, have a low UAI but the Korean culture correlates very highly with UAI. This manifests itself in the high regard the Korean international students have for rules and regulations, structure and conformity while the others are more tolerant of change. The Nigerian students also reflect a more moderated influence of this dimension in their relaxed attitude toward rules and regulations. The Korean international students' 'do or die' attitude towards ambition and achievement indicates a more 'masculine' trait whereas the other international students express a more oriented and nurturing attitude indicative of a lower 'masculine' trait.

The behaviour patterns of all the Asian international students as well as Nigerian international students seem directed by group norms as in collectivist cultures. Though they rank low on individualism yet within the collectivist ethos, there could be differences for example, the Korean international students 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. Another cultural dimension shared by the international students in this study is the long term orientation. In spite of the adjustment challenges, they persist and persevere in their goals with varying amounts of tenacity.

The above discussion and the relevant literature point to many factors being responsible for the shared and differential experiences of the international students (some beyond the scope of this paper). The results of this study emphasise cultural distance and language as important determinants of the adjustment experiences of the international students. The degree of cultural distance shapes their adjustment experience - the greater the perceived cultural distance, the greater the challenges and thus the greater the preference for co-national interactions. The Myanmar and Indonesian international students have the least cultural issues; food does not pose much of a problem, they view the facilities offered here more positively and find it easy to assimilate. Their challenge is English language. The Indians and Maldivians are faced with hetero-stereotypes, a cultural baggage inherited

from the local Indians. The Mongolians and Koreans have quite a long cultural distance to navigate but the Koreans with their auto-stereotypes and strength in numbers are not unduly bothered; the Mongolians have to contend with quite some issues. Their acid test is their proficiency in English. The Nigerians have to bridge a serious cultural gap, face negative cultural and personal stereotypes and some language problems of accent.

The mental programming (Hofstede, 2001) of the student is also determined by age, biological make-up (universal) and personal factors. In spite of adjustment problems, at this stage of adolescence, the lure of greater freedom and being away from parental control are rewards difficult to resist.

5.3 Implications of the Study

There are several implications that emerged from this study. Firstly, it is vital to orientate the students and all academic and administrative staff in the programme 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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