

## Academic Adaptation: The Experience of Malay Muslim Postgraduate Students (Adaptasi Akademik: Pengalaman Pelajar Pascasiswazah Melayu Muslim)

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### ABSTRACT

*This qualitative study aimed to explore the academic experiences and coping strategies among Malay Muslim postgraduate students in Australia. The research participants were thirteen Malaysian Malay Muslim postgraduate students (9 females, 4 males) studying in a university in South Australia. They were either undergoing their Master or PhD degrees. The findings show that as international students, the Malaysian Malay Muslim postgraduate students had difficulties adjusting themselves to their new learning culture. In order to cope with the situation, they became active learners in academic areas, made changes and sought assistance in their daily lives through their spouse, other Malaysian friends or university colleagues. Maintaining faith was also frequently mentioned as one of their coping strategies.*

*Keywords: Malaysian Malay Muslims, Postgraduate students, International students, Academic experiences*

### ABSTRAK

*Kajian kualitatif ini bertujuan untuk meneroka pengalaman akademik dan strategi yang digunakan oleh pelajar pasca siswazah Melayu Muslim Malaysia di Australia. Peserta kajian ini terdiri daripada tigabelas orang pelajar pasca siswazah Melayu Muslim Malaysia (9 perempuan, 4 lelaki) yang sedang menuntut di sebuah universiti di Selatan Australia. Pelajar ini adalah yang sedang mengikuti pengajian di peringkat Sarjana dan Doktor Falsafah. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa sebagai pelajar antarabangsa, pelajar pasca siswazah Melayu Muslim Malaysia ini menghadapi masalah dalam menyesuaikan diri dalam persekitaran pembelajaran yang baru. Untuk mengatasi masalah ini, mereka menjadi pelajar yang aktif dalam bidang pelajaran, membuat perubahan dan mendapatkan bantuan dalam kehidupan seharian melalui pasangan, rakan-rakan senegara dan juga rakan seuniversiti. Kepercayaan agama juga merupakan salah satu strategi mengatasi masalah yang digunakan oleh pelajar-pelajar ini.*

*Kata kunci: Melayu Muslim Malaysia, Pelajar pasca siswazah, Pelajar antarabangsa, Pengalaman pendidikan*

### INTRODUCTION

#### SCENARIO OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students are scholars who study in a foreign learning institution. Among English native countries, the United States (US) is one of the most popular countries among international students. There were approximately 624,000 international students enrolled in American universities in the 2007/2008 academic year (US, 2009). Although not receiving as much enrollment as the US, other countries have gained similar attraction from international students around the world such as the United Kingdom (UK). In the latter part of this decade, the total number of international students enrolled in the UK was nearly 400,000 students and half of them were graduate students who registered for courses such as business and engineering. The total of international students' enrollment made the UK the second largest country after the US to host international students (Atlas of Student Mobility: United Kingdom, 2009).

However, since the tragedy of the terrorist attack on September 11th 2001, the number of international students enrolled in the US has dropped dramatically, as a result of government implementation of its new policy in combating terrorist activities. Consequently, international students around the world have shifted their attention to other countries such as Britain and Australia.

In terms of its geographic location, Australia is the nearest English native country for some Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. In comparison with the US and the UK, Australia is regarded as the third largest country of international students' enrollment.

There is a large number of international students studying at Australian colleges and universities, and the numbers are increasing. In 2012, Australia hosted a high record of over 500,000 overseas students. The total of overseas or international students from Asia has increased over the past twenty years (AEI 2014). It has been identified that due to the change in social and economic policies in Asian countries, the number of Asian students studying in Australia over the past two decades has changed (ABS

2014). Among 230,923 international students enrolled in the higher education sector in 2012, more than one quarter coming from China (29%), India (10.5%), Korea (5.4%), Vietnam (4.4%) and followed by Malaysia (9%).

Prior research has revealed that international students face many challenges in adjusting to their new environment (Cigularova 2005; Khawaja & Dempsey 2007; Selvadurai 1992; Wang 2003). Generally, these students face difficulties in academic success, cultural experiences and in daily activities. Studies conducted in the United States of America indicate that adjustment is crucial to students' academic success (Charles & Stewart 1991; Haydon 2003; Selvadurai 1992). Focus on student adjustment has prompted administrators of tertiary institutions to consider their procedures and support services. The adjustment processes, according to the research, can have an impact on student attrition. Studies reported that international students from non-English speaking backgrounds have more difficulties in their class and exams because they required more time to understand the content of books, journal articles, etc. (Lin & Yi 1997; Ryan & Twibell 2000). They also reported having trouble with their academic writing due to limited vocabulary and poor English skills (Lin & Yi 1997). Other studies demonstrate that the students' ability to adapt to a new academic environment and retaining their self-esteem are dependent on their English language ability (Hayes & Lin 1994; Senel et al. 2006). It is therefore important that international students master their English language skills.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the academic experiences of Malay Muslim Malaysian postgraduate students, to examine how these students view the internal and external resources available to them at the time of their arrival in Australia, as well as to explore the types of obstacles they encountered and strategies they used to overcome them.

The rationale for this study is that there are increasing numbers of Malaysian postgraduate students in Australia. In 2012, there was a total of 21,587 Malaysian students enrolled in Australian tertiary institutions and Malaysia represented the fifth largest source of tertiary enrollments (AEI 2014). Although the enrollment numbers of Malaysian students in Australia is high, there has been little research conducted on the experiences of these students while studying and living in Australia. In addition, only Malay Malaysian postgraduate students who received a Malaysian Government sponsorship were chosen as the participants in this study. Previous research shows that sponsored students often experience pressure to perform well in their academic studies in order to prove that they deserve the scholarship (Harman 2003; Oropeza et al. 1991; Poyrazli et al. 2001). Sometimes international students' families' expectations about their academic studies in a new and different educational system are also unrealistic (Oropeza et al. 1991). Cultural expectations and those emanating from scholarship providers can also appear uncompromising. Harman (2003) conducted

a study among international PhD students in Australia, concluded that only 13% of international students were studying for their PhD degrees for more than three years. This is because most of them enrolled as full-time students and were under pressure from sponsors to complete their studies on time. In addition, the pressure to succeed adds another stress factor for these students, especially Asian international students. Typically, international students experience great stress in order to achieve complete success in their academic studies.

#### ACADEMIC ADJUSTMENT ISSUES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

International students who study in foreign countries have to face new educational systems as well as new learning skills. Being new arrivals, international students also have to struggle with local host language and culture. Unfamiliarity with the new educational system often creates difficulties for international students (Lin & Yi 1997). This new education environment puts more pressure on international students as they are required to work hard to cope with the new demands as international students.

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#### METHODOLOGY

In this study a total of thirteen (nine females and four males) Malay Muslim Malaysian postgraduate students participated in an individual interview (Table 1). All participants were aged between 27 to 42 years. The length of their stay in South Australia ranged from six months and three years. Nine of the participants were undertaking their PhD degree, while others were doing their Master degree. All students were married and sponsored by the Malaysian Government.

The thematic analysis procedure was carried out for data analysis (Braun & Clarke 2006) that enabled identification of pattern (themes) within the data. Initially, interview transcripts were read several times in their entirety to capture the full content of the participants' narratives. Segments of the interviews were then identified as meaning units and summarised into property statements closely reflecting the language of the participants. These involved five phases which are; familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and producing the report.

TABLE 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

Code	Age (years)	Sex (M/F)	Length of stay at Australia (months)	Current Courses	Work at Malaysia
S1	42	F	26	PhD	Pharmacist
S2	35	M	6	PhD	Tutor
S3	28	F	6	PhD	Tutor
S4	34	F	7	Master	Teacher
S5	35	M	7	PhD	Lecturer
S6	27	F	6	PhD	Lecturer
S7	36	F	42	PhD	Lecturer
S8	34	M	6	Master	Researcher
S9	33	M	18	Master	Tutor
S10	40	F	24	PhD	Lecturer
S11	41	F	18	Master	Architect
S12	28	F	16	PhD	Lecturer
S13	34	F	12	PhD	Lecturer

Note: S = Student; M = male, F = female

RESULTS

ACADEMIC CHALLENGES

Consistent with other researchers (Barker et al. 1991; Novera 2004; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh 2006; Ramburuth 2001), this study illuminated that international students experienced great difficulties in their academic adjustment. In this study, academic adjustment was the major problem faced by the participants. Our study indicated that these postgraduate students faced challenges in their academic life in four major areas, which were: unfamiliarity with the Australian academic system, language difficulties, writing academically and unstructured supervision (Figure 1).

Results of this study showed that unfamiliarity with the academic system creates an uncomfortable atmosphere for these Malaysian postgraduate students. One participant responded in terms of the grading system practices in her university in Australia was different as compared to the US education system through which she did her previous studies. Therefore, she had difficulties in terms of adapting with the academic system. She also admitted that she had

to struggle and make a lot of effort in order to survive in a new academic system.

Academic system is different. For example, in the United States final exam worths 40% but here, I have to struggle a lot for final exam because it worths 60%. If I couldn't make it through my final here, I will fail. So, I have to struggle a lot here –S 4.

These results suggest that helping students to familiarize with the new academic environment will assist them to adjust well academically. There are two implications of this finding. Firstly, helping the international students to become familiar with the new academic environment through consultation with lecturers will likely prevent them from falling behind in their academic results and to stay on track and thus achieve a better academic result. Secondly, the international student office and university counselling centres could assist at these students by developing support groups to help them cope with the new academic environment. In addition, more relevant information such as the Australian educational system which includes grading system, tutorials and others should be provided or informed to the students during orientation programs so that these students could prepare themselves prior to their academic semester.

Another findings of this study was that the Malay Muslim Malaysian postgraduate students who have difficulty in the English language were reported having problems in their academic performances. As English is a second language for these students, they have to struggle in order to survive the Australian academic system which is conducted primarily in English language. For example one participant reported that it was hard for her to adapt with her new academic environment in Australia as English is her second language. She had to attend several English language classes, be involved in group meetings and make contact with other researchers in order to improve her English language skills. Even though she can cope with the new systems, she admitted that she needed to improve her English skills.

At first, the process was quite difficult for me as English is my second language. Everything seemed hard for me to adapt. However, after attending a few classes, group meetings and making friends with other researchers, now

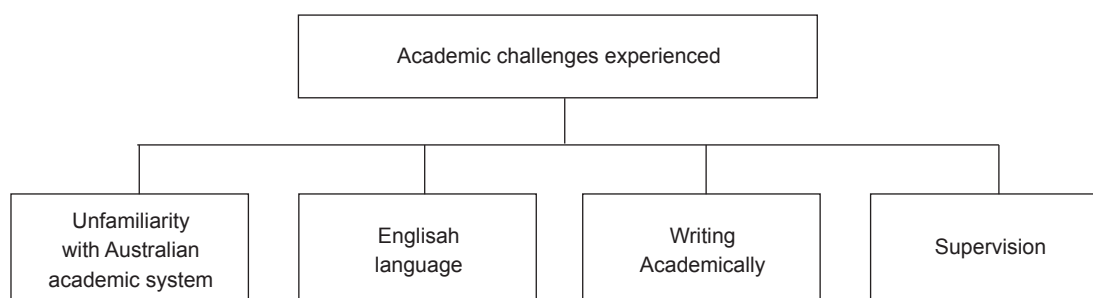


FIGURE 1. Academic challenges experienced by Malay Muslim Postgraduate Students in Australia

I can cope with the systems. However, there's still a lot I need to learn to improve my skills – S3.

This confirms previous research that indicates English proficiency is crucial for international students' academic performance (Poyrazli et al. 2001). Therefore, in order to perform well in academics, international students need to improve their host language; that is English. These results suggest that international students could improve their English language by regularly attending language courses. In addition, international students are encouraged to develop relationships and interact with local students to build their confidence and eventually their English language competency.

Results also indicated that writing academically was another academic difficulty cited by the participants. For example, one of the participants stated that she had to register for the university's workshop in order to learn academic writing.

In academic writing, I admit that I'm still learning to write academically. But I'm learning by going to UniSA workshop – S6.

This finding supports previous studies indicating that being familiar and skilled with English and academic writing will enhance the international students' academic performances. Therefore in order to succeed in their academic writing, international students particularly from Malaysia should attend academic workshops organised by the university's library and local public libraries or seek for help from the international student's office regarding their difficulties in academic writing.

Another findings on the difficulties experienced by the participants was supervision. The findings support that linear supervision was one of the problem experienced by postgraduate international students. Harman (2003) reported that Asian international students had difficulties with supervisors who are democratic and less structured in their style of supervision. Furthermore, these students expected that their supervisor will act as a 'guru' to give them the answers.

I think post graduate education is a bit linear. There's more freedom but sometimes it worries me as well; I might go astray. Now I tried my best to be on track with my study. – S10

STRATEGIES FOR LIVING IN AUSTRALIA

Results of this study showed that one of the strategies used by Malaysian postgraduate students to succeed in the Australian academic system was to be more optimistic regarding their academic achievement. This may be due to them being sponsored by the Malaysian government; that these students were required to excel in their academic life as well as to complete their studies within the time frame given. They also must return to serve the country. In order to do that, they must succeed in their academic performance and complete their studies

I want to finish my PhD on time and return with new skills, knowledge and experiences which I learned here and contribute to my organisation – S12.

Another findings of this study was that these postgraduate students reported making physical and mental changes in order to adapt to the new academic environment. They also reported having their daily routine change to accommodate the new rules and regulations in Australia. For example, one participant shared that by setting her mind as a student, she managed to survive in Adelaide.

It did not really tally with my earlier perception but in reality, I gradually fit into it. It means that, what was in my mind before I came here was misleading. So it does not really matter anymore once you come here. Once you are in Australia, you just have to make do with what you have. It means that you try slowly to adapt with the children's education. Adapt with the needs and requirement here – S7.

Results also indicated that Malaysian international students sought for support from their spouses. In addition, they also sought support from other Malaysian friends as well as university staff, which included supervisors, administration staff and colleagues. The findings support the previous researches that the presence of the partner or family can provide social support (Beach et al. 1993; Hayes & Lin 1994; Katz et al. 2000; Pedersen 1991). Current results are also consistent with other studies indicating that married female students received support from their husbands, as 69% of the participants were female students. This may be due the fact that spousal support helps to

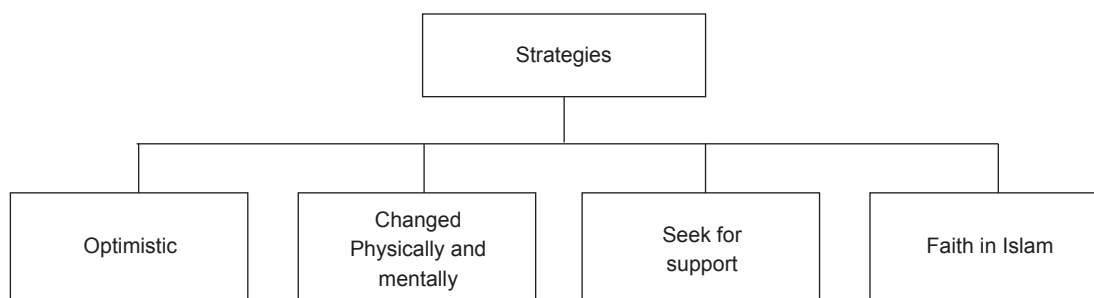


FIGURE 2. Strategies used by Malay Muslim Postgraduate Students in Australia

reduce stress experienced by the participants. As a result, the support acts as a shield to help these students overcome their difficulties during their stay in Australia. In addition, since these students are married, their spouses and family could provide social support for them; which contributed as a coping mechanism for the students.

Meanwhile, other studies indicate that academic and personal support from other PhD students which includes local PhD students as well as PhD students from the same home country also helps the student attain academic success (Harman 2003). For instance, through weekly gathering, Malaysian postgraduate students formed a social group among other Malaysian who live in Adelaide in order to overcome their academic and other social problems.

I feel happy to know Malaysian families because sometimes when we get together, we discuss about our problems and ways to solve them. We should help each other because we know better and speak the same language – SP12.

By doing so, the network among Malaysian students grow stronger and this helps to reduce other psychological issues such as loneliness and homesickness.

The present study also highlights that many Malaysian postgraduate students perceived their religious belief in Islam as a source of support and functioned as a strategy for living in Australia.

I think my faith is my strength because if I don't have faith in myself and faith of who I am as a Muslim, maybe, I won't be able to survive. That's what I think – S1.

It is well understood as Abdullah (1996) described that one of the Malays underlying assumption on values was the strong belief in Allah the Almighty. As she explained, to commit to the belief, Malays pray in their daily lives and share rituals to remember Allah as God. In the interview, participants reported that religious or spiritual belief connected them with a power from Allah (God) who helped them during their daily lives in general, as well as in their academic challenges. As one participant stated:

Faith is very important because it helps you cope with difficulties that you face in Australia. In fact, until today as a student we have to rely 100% on our faith in order to make us feel secure, less frustrated when something happens. – S7

Interestingly, another study found that religious functions as a buffer for suicidal thought (Bostik & Everall, 2007) by providing a sense of belonging and social support. Other studies found that God as an attachment figure provides a reliable source of support in general (Bostik & Everall 2007; Rowatt & Kirkpatrick 2002; Sim & Loh 2003) as well as during specific times of need (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick 2008).

## DISCUSSIONS

The majority of the participants in this study were academic staff at Malaysian public universities as they were encouraged by their employers to enhance their academic competencies by improving their academic qualifications. These finding suggests that this policy needs to be maintained as it will be beneficial for the academic staff at public universities to obtain overseas exposure to enhance their knowledge in their discipline area. Furthermore, it will benefit the universities' productivity as well as the Malaysian government as more research and new findings will be discovered. These result suggests that the Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education works closely with the Australian Embassy in Malaysia, IDP Australia and other agencies to conduct more road shows or to visit Malaysian public universities in order to provide relevant information to potential Malaysian postgraduate internationals, the majority of which are university academic staff. As all participants in this study were sponsored, these students were obligated to excel in their academic performance and return to Malaysia within the time frame given. It is a must for them to return and serve the country. In order to do that, they must succeed in their academic performance and complete their studies. In order to succeed academically, these students require good writing and reading skills as well as proficiency in the English language. A workshop can be offered by the international student office to help these students improve their writing skills. In addition, support groups can also be offered by universities' counselling centres to help these students cope with any difficulties in their academic matters. Furthermore, to avoid any other stressors, the Malaysian government should ensure that the scholarships given are delivered on time. In terms of sosio-cultural and personal psychological adjustment, physical and mental changes are required in order to adapt to the new cultural environment. Potential international students have to be ready to change their daily routine in order to accommodate with the new rules and regulations in Australia. By doing so, they could reduce the level of culture shock which often experienced by international students. The most important thing, as Muslim international students, the never ending networking with Allah the Almighty is crucial as all participants believe that religious belief in Islam is a source of support and functioned as a strategy for living in Australia.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on this present study, it can be concluded that as international students, the Malaysian postgraduate students do face challenges in their academic life while living in Australia. Challenges can contribute to the students' stress factors as it affects their academic performance as well as their daily lives.

This result suggests that helping Malaysian postgraduate students maintain their academic performances will likely help them to adjust better in Australia. In order to succeed academically, these students require good writing and reading skills as well as proficiency in the English language. Language or academic writing workshops can be offered by the international student office to help these students improve their writing skills. In addition, support groups can also be offered by the counselling centres to help these students cope with any difficulties in their academic matters.

Therefore, it is hoped that the present study will help future Malaysian postgraduate students improve their preparation as well as their adjustment process prior to coming to Australia. Also, the Malaysian government together with the Malaysian Student Department in Australia should facilitate more effort to help these students manage their lives in Australia thus completing their study on time and returning to serve their country.

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