

Beyond Western Paradigms: Enhancing the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model for Malaysia's Multicultural Society

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ABSTRACT

International student mobility has emerged as a key feature of contemporary higher education, resulting in complex intercultural dynamics to universities worldwide. However, most existing intercultural communication frameworks currently in use are Western-centric and often fail to capture the institutional structures, religious norms, and experiences of students found in many Asian societies. Therefore, this study examines the applicability of Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model within Malaysia's multicultural and multireligious higher education environment, where collectivist orientations, religious norms, and institutional structures shape both students' adaptation and staff support practices. The main objective is to explore the intercultural experiences, particularly on academic, social, and cultural adjustment processes, among international postgraduate students and academic staff across four Malaysian research universities to assess the relevance of Kim's model. Using qualitative research, data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving 12 international postgraduate students and 12 academic staff members. Thematic analysis revealed seven additional adaptation factors that extend the model: Work Factor, Personal Factor, Academic Adaptation, Psychological Adaptation, Social Adaptation, Physical Adaptation, and Cultural Adaptation. These dimensions highlight localized challenges related to institutional practices, communication, cultural familiarity, and psychological well-being. The Institutional Factor emphasizes teaching approaches, support systems, and relational engagement, while Cultural Adaptation addresses lifestyle, values, and leisure strategies. Rather than replacing Kim's framework, this study proposes a contextual refinement that strengthens its explanatory power for understanding intercultural adjustment in Malaysia and other culturally complex societies.

Keywords: *Intercultural adaptation model, cultural adaptation, international students, student experience, intercultural communication.*

INTRODUCTION

International student mobility now defines globalisation, reshaping higher education, economies, and intercultural relations. Governments increasingly regard international students as not only contributors to academic diversity but also as strategic assets in knowledge economies, soft-power diplomacy, and transnational labour markets. Consequently, internationalisation dominates policies across Asia, Europe, Australia, and North America. While global competition to attract international students intensifies, the sustainability of internationalisation now hinges on the quality of students' experiences, well-being, and engagement with host societies.

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Malaysia has emerged as a major education hub in Asia through policies such as the Internationalisation Strategy (2007) and the Malaysian Education Blueprint 2015–2025. These initiatives significantly increased international student enrolment, reaching over 40,000 in public universities by 2021, with postgraduates forming nearly 60% (EMGS, 2023), and 139,341 students from 160 countries by 2025 (Bernama, 2025; Rajaendram, 2026). However, research highlights persistent challenges including language barriers, academic communication difficulties, pedagogical mismatches, cultural adaptation issues, and social isolation, which affect academic success and psychological well-being (Sawir et al., 2008; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Glass & Westmont, 2014; Kaur & Sidhu, 2010; Singh & Jack, 2018; Yusliza, 2012).

Theoretical frameworks are crucial for understanding international student adaptation. Young Yun Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model (2017) views adaptation as a stress–adaptation–growth process, where individuals negotiate host and home cultural identities. Although widely applied in Western settings, the model assumes individualism, linearity, and secular social structures, limiting its applicability in contexts like Malaysia, where Islamic values, Malay culture, and hierarchical relations shape social life. Given Malaysia's diverse international student population, this study addresses calls to de-Westernise intercultural communication theory by extending Kim's model to better reflect pluralism and complex educational contexts (Miike, 2006; Chen, 2009).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural and academic adaptation among international students is multifaceted, requiring adjustments beyond geographical relocation. Students encounter challenges such as living independently, navigating unfamiliar educational systems, environmental conditions, and new linguistic landscapes (Abdullah et al., 2015; Chaiyasat, 2020; Lashari et al., 2018; Bochner, 2003; Fritz et al., 2008; Yushriman et al., 2024). Mulyana and Murtiningsih (2017) emphasise that adaptation is shaped by individual coping strategies and the host country's social context.

Language barriers and cultural distance remain key obstacles to communication in academic settings (Zhang & Zhou, 2021). For instance, international students in Sabah struggle with Malay, especially local dialects, which slows cultural and linguistic adaptation (Rathakrishnan et al., 2021). Students also face dietary transitions, linguistic challenges, and balancing academic responsibilities with family obligations (Aizawa & McKinley, 2020; Freeman et al., 2017; Yu & Mustafa, 2017; Zhang et al., 2021). These findings highlight the need for culturally sensitive support addressing both academic and socio-cultural dimensions.

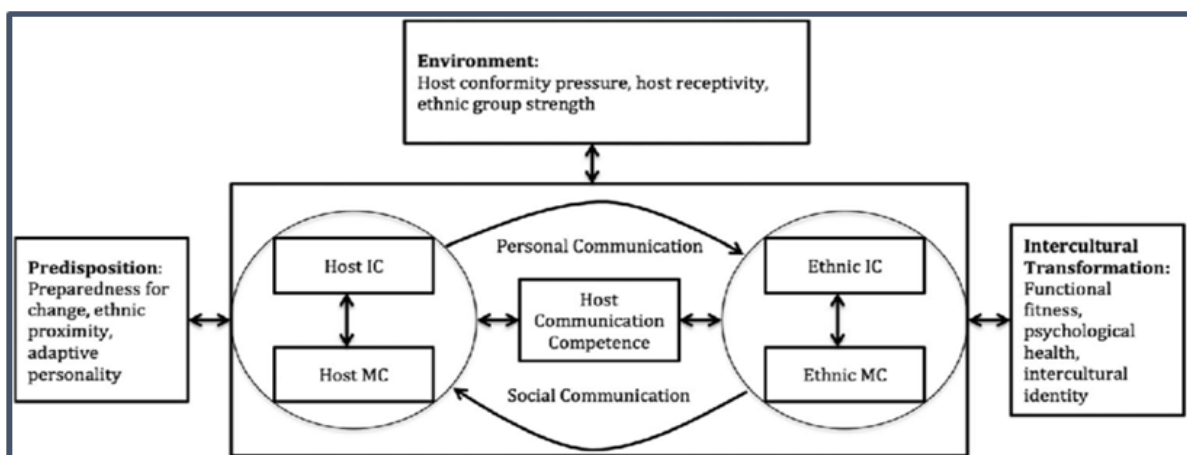


Figure 1: Cross-cultural adaptation model (Kim, 2017)

Kim's (2017) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model provides a theoretical lens, conceptualising adaptation as a dynamic process involving stress, adjustment, and growth. However, its Western epistemology necessitates scrutiny in culturally and religiously complex societies such as Malaysia, where everyday life is shaped by traditions, religion, and communal norms (Singh & Jack, 2022; Singh, 2021; Abd Malek & Ahmad, 2023; Yushriman et al., 2024). For example, norms regarding modest attire pose specific adaptation challenges for students unfamiliar with these expectations (Mahmud & Swami, 2020; Nurhayati & Cahyadi, 2022; Tahir & Arif, 2021).

International students face challenges beyond Western-centric intercultural adjustments. Sociocultural and religious norms, language barriers, and ethnocultural diversity shape their experiences in complex ways. Ma et al. (2022) identified acculturation stressors such as fear of mistakes, microaggressions, and limited campus diversity among students in Western universities, highlighting the need to explore culturally specific stressors in Asian environments. Refining Kim's model for Asian contexts can provide nuanced insights into adaptation, supporting smoother cultural transitions and meaningful intercultural engagement.

Several scholars have emphasised the necessity of critically interrogating Western-derived frameworks for Asian contexts (Arasaratnam & Banerjee, 2011; Chen, 2009; Miike, 2003, 2006). Kim's earlier work (2001) did not fully account for digital connectedness, mobility, and contemporary sociopolitical climates. The 2017 revision integrates emerging variables influencing the stress-adaptation-growth process, yet empirical studies testing its applicability in Asian universities, particularly Malaysia, remain limited (Lee et al., 2022; Sawir et al., 2020; Liu, 2023).

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study used semi-structured interviews to explore adaptation experiences of international postgraduate students and staff across four Malaysian research universities: UPM, UKM, UM, and USM. Students were recruited via snowball and quota sampling to ensure disciplinary and national diversity. Staff were identified through department heads and registrars. Data saturation was reached after ten interviews per group, consistent with previous research (Islam & Aldaihani, 2022; Guest et al., 2020), resulting in 12 students and 12 staff participants.

Students had resided in Malaysia for at least one year and were enrolled in postgraduate programmes, while staff had at least five years' experience working with international students. Ethical approval was obtained from Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT/JKEPM/2022/95), and informed consent was secured. Interviews were conducted via WebEx and Google Meet between January and June 2021, in English, Bahasa Melayu, or both. Sessions lasted 1–2 hours and addressed social, cultural, academic, and psychological adaptation for students, and institutional support and engagement strategies for staff. The interview questions were organised into two sets and several sections covering informants' demographic profiles, social and cultural adaptation, support systems, academic adaptation, and psychological and physical wellbeing (for students), as well as student management and general institutional issues (for staff).

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using ATLAS.ti. An intercultural communication scholar reviewed interview questions to ensure relevance, clarity, and cultural appropriateness, enhancing content validity (Creswell, 2014; Creswell &

Miller, 2000). Thematic analysis revealed four adaptation domains: social integration, academic adjustment, cultural adaptation, and psychological coping, aligning with Kim's model while highlighting context-specific Malaysian experiences.

Demography of Informants

The dataset comprised 12 international students and 12 staff members from UPM, UKM, USM, and UM. Students represented seven countries, with Indonesia and Jordan as the largest groups, spanning master's and doctoral programs in diverse disciplines including engineering, communication, social sciences, education, physics, computer science, chemistry, and economics. Seven students were male, five female, aged 23–30+.

Table 1: International student informants: Demographic information

	Gender	University	Age	Course	Country
S1	Male	UPM	30 years above	PhD Electrical Engineering	Nigeria
S2	Male	UPM	30 years above	PhD Mechanical Engineering	Syria
S3	Male	UPM	30 years above	PhD Aerospace Engineering	Tanzania
S4	Male	UKM	27-29	PhD Health Communication	Indonesia
S5	Female	UKM	23	MSc Political Science	Indonesia
S6	Female	UKM	24-26	MSc Educational Psychology	Indonesia
S7	Female	USM	27-29	MSc Medical Physics	Jordan
S8	Female	USM	27-29	MsC Radiation Physics	Jordan
S9	Male	USM	27-29	MsC. Computer Science	Iran
S10	Male	UM	24-26	MSc. Chemistry	Indonesia
S11	Male	UM	24-26	MSc. of Computer Science	Bangladesh
S12	Male	UM	27-29	PhD Economy	Jordan

Staff were equally divided by gender, from various administrative units, fluent in English and Bahasa Melayu (except one with basic English). All had over ten years of institutional experience.

Table 2: University personnel informants: Demographic information

Code of informant	University	Gender	Office/Centre	English Fluency Level	Bahasa Melayu Fluency Level
SP1	UKM	Male	Pusat Pengurusan Akademik	Fluent	Fluent
SP2	USM	Male	Nerve Centre USM	Fluent	Fluent
SP3	USM	Female	Graduate School of Business	Fluent	Fluent
SP4	USM	Male	Desasiswa Bakti Fajar Permai & Petas Universiti Sains Malaysia	Basic	Fluent
SP5	UKM	Female	Fakulti sains sosial dan kemanusiaan	Fluent	Fluent
SP6	UPM	Female	School of Graduate Studies	Fluent	Fluent
SP7	UPM	Female	Centre For Corporate Strategy And Relations	Fluent	Fluent
SP8	UPM	Male	Fakulti Sains sosial dan kemanusiaan	Fluent	Fluent
SP9	UM	Male	Fakulti Sastera dan Sains Sosial	Fluent	Fluent

SP10	UM	Male	Fakulti Sastera dan Sains Sosial	Fluent	Fluent
SP11	UM	Female	Institut Asia-Eropah	Fluent	Fluent
SP12	UKM	Female	Pusat Perumahan Pelajar	Fluent	Fluent

Note: SP = Staff personnel

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings and discussion in two distinct subsections, one is international student informants and second is university staff informants. This separation ensures clarity in presenting how each group contributes to understanding cultural adaptation and how the findings inform the refinement of Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model (2017).

International Student Informants

Drawing on Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model (2017), this finding categorizes these challenges into three primary domains namely personal factor, external factor, and institutional factors as in Table 3 below.

Table 3 : Themes emerging from international student data

Themes emerged	Type of Adaptation	Description
Personal Factors	Physical Adaptation	Comfortability: adjusting to new climate, food, health routines.
	Personal Adaptation	Social circle: coping with emotional, psychological, and individual changes in a new environment.
External Factors	Social Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Medium of communication: language use and language barrier. • Guidance: early exposure and safe environment
	Cultural Adaptation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lifestyle: Understanding and adjusting to new cultural norms, values, and practices • Emotional regulation: it reflects how individuals manage emotional responses to unfamiliar cultural environments, contributing to their overall adjustment and integration. • Familiarity: this element provided a sense of comfort, continuity, and reduced the intensity of cultural dissonance often experienced in unfamiliar environments.
Institutional Factors	Academic Adaptation	Teaching style and sense of responsibility: Adapting to different teaching styles, learning approaches, and expectations of personal responsibility in academic settings.

Personal Factor

One of the key themes that emerged from the study is personal factors, which encompasses a range of challenges encountered by international students in Malaysia. Under this theme, physical adaptation refers to the difficulties international students face in adjusting to a new climate, unfamiliar dietary habits, and altered health routines. Equally important is personal adaptation, which involves managing emotional and psychological responses such as homesickness, identity-related stress, and feelings of isolation or anxiety as mentioned by the informants in the Table 4 below.

Table 4: Personal factors: Themes and quotes from international student data

Theme	Type of Adaptation	Description	Interview Quotes
Personal Factors	Physical Adaptation	Comfort with climate, dietary habits, and health routines	<p>"...all facilities in the university are so good, and one thing that is interesting to me is about the dormitory..." (S1)</p> <p>"Malaysia is more comfortable than Austria and Iran..." (S2)</p> <p>"So, I received the offer letter from Columbia University Canada, and the temperature is very low... very much lower than Malaysia and Bangladesh." (S3)</p>
	Personal Adaptation	Coping with homesickness, emotional stress, and isolation	<p>"This support group was first found in my university's library... The group's name is Sumber Kebahagiaan..." (S2)</p> <p>"We have a community... for Tanzanians in Malaysia... whenever there is new information... we will know." (S4)</p> <p>"I call straight away every time homesickness consumes me... Quality time with family was already replaced with quality time with friends." (S5)</p>

The analysis of personal factors reveals that international students' adaptation is multidimensional, with physical and psychological domains closely interconnected. Physical comfort, shaped by campus facilities, environmental quality, and daily mobility, directly influences emotional security and engagement. However, transportation limitations and climatic challenges increase stress, reducing students' energy, social interaction, and academic participation.

Psychological adaptation, reflected through social circles, plays a vital role in reducing emotional strain, isolation, and cultural dislocation. Formal and informal support networks provide emotional support, identity affirmation, and practical assistance, strengthening students' sense of belonging. Digital communication further sustained social connectivity, enabling easier adaptation to Malaysia's culture and environment through accessible online information and social media exposure (Jiang & Ahmad, 2025).

Taken together, these findings challenge linear models of international student adjustment that treat physical and psychological adaptation as separate or sequential stages. Instead, they demonstrate that comfort, mobility, climate, and social embeddedness are deeply intertwined, producing either cumulative vulnerability or cumulative resilience. Students who were able to align favourable physical environments with strong social support systems displayed greater emotional stability and intercultural openness, whereas mismatches between environmental expectations and lived realities intensified early adaptation stress. Thus, personal factors should be understood not simply as individual attributes but as relationally and environmentally situated processes that critically shape the trajectories of international students' adaptation.

External Factors

External factors also play a crucial role, including social adaptation, which involves the ability to form relationships, integrate with peers, and navigate new social norms, as well as cultural adaptation, which entails understanding and adjusting to the host country's values, traditions, and communication styles. Table 5 below highlights the informants experienced:

Table 5: External factors: Themes and quotes from international student data

Theme	Type of Adaptation	Description	Interview Quotes
External Factors	Social Adaptation	Building relationships, integrating with peers, and navigating social norms	<p>"Most of my group mates are very dedicated to their given tasks. There are none that have gone missing during the middle of assignments, and none of them have been a burden to either one of us." (S2)</p> <p>"Assignments were always done harmoniously with my classmate although it is an online class. We made time for each other and never crossed the assignments dateline." (S1)</p> <p>"We do activities such as hanging out in the online space (GMeet, WeBex, WhatsApp, etc.) and if there are assignments that require brainstorming, quizzes, we always wait for any one of us to initiate it like saying things such as 'Guys, let us study!'" (S5)</p> <p>"I usually made many international friends during football. Many of my friends, I get to know my current best friend because we play football together. Apart from being in the same faculties, we actually never met before football unites us." (S4)</p> <p>"In my first and second years of degree, I did not have any friends from my classmates or any Malay friends, but later, when we made a group for an assignment, we started to share our daily life, gossiping and hanging out together." (S3)</p>
	Cultural Adaptation	Understanding and adjusting to host country values, traditions, and communication styles	<p>"I am so glad that although Malaysia is not a Middle East country, the local food suits my taste. Sometimes, when I wanted to eat food from Syria, I could easily Google them, and they were one click away." (S1)</p> <p>"I know that all of the Malaysians can speak Malay, but I did not expect to hear Chinese talking in Mandarin and Indians talking in Tamil. We all speak in Bahasa Indonesia back home." (S5)</p> <p>"We have Chinese and Malay in Indonesia, but we rarely have Indians there. And I am so excited that we can recognise a person's race and religion not only by their physical attributes, but also by their name. It is not common in Indonesia because we all have Indonesian names as our identity." (S2)</p>

		<p>“Although I have more international friends than the locals, I still think that the locals are somehow special. The majority of my locals’ friends are Malay, and doing business or talking with them is very easy, and you will feel very comfortable with them. I also have friends from different races like Chinese and Indians as well. I am also from Sabah and Sarawak. But I think the Malays are much friendlier.” (S4)</p>
		<p>“I always went home every long-term holiday. When the COVID-19 travel ban was enforced, I was in despair. I miss my mom’s cooking so much. Fortunately, because of technology, I am able to cook my favourite food with my mom. I am so glad Malaysia is a country with multiple ethnicities. All of the required ingredients listed by mother were easy to find.” (S3)</p>
Emotional Regulation & Familiarity	Using leisure activities and coping strategies to mitigate stress	<p>“When I had to escape from my assignments, me and my friends would go on an immediate and unplanned road-trip. At this rate I can finish travelling the whole Peninsula Malaysia. I have been to Malacca to see the infamous historical castle, and Negeri Sembilan to see the building built without nails.” (S2)</p> <p>“Well, I usually do not want to waste my time, but besides studying, I think I would prefer to go on a vacation. Since my country does not have that many islands, I always go on an island-hopping activity or hiking. For the time being, I have been to Pulau Pangkor, Pulau Redang, and Pulau Besar near Tioman and Redang. I have also been to Langkawi.” (S3)</p> <p>“I prefer to visit new places to get fresh air and view. So far, I have visited Johor, Cameron in Pahang, Penang, Kedah, and Nilai, Negeri Sembilan.” (S5)</p>

The adaptation of international students in Malaysia is a multifaceted process encompassing social integration, cultural adjustment, and emotional regulation. Social adaptation primarily involves building relationships, integrating with peers, and navigating local social norms. Findings indicate that students actively develop support networks both from their home country and among local peers to mitigate isolation and homesickness. Ethnic-based support groups, cooperative classmates, and self-created peer circles were reported to provide emotional stability, practical assistance, and academic collaboration (S1, S2, S3, S4, S5). In addition, proactive engagement with local students including initiating friendships and participating in group activities enhanced intercultural integration and reinforced a sense of belonging (S3, S4). The ability to foster supportive social circles was critical for maintaining psychological well-being, reducing stress, and facilitating academic and personal adjustment.

Cultural adaptation emerged as a complementary dimension, reflecting students’ understanding and adjustment to host country values, traditions, and communication styles. International students employed strategies such as exploring local culture, tourism activities, and engagement with everyday practices to develop familiarity with Malaysian norms (S2, S3,

S4, S5). Positive interactions with locals contributed to comfort, trust, and social acceptance, whereas negative encounters prompted students to develop adaptive strategies and recalibrate expectations (S4, S5). Furthermore, lifestyle and familiarity factors such as multicultural exposure, dietary preferences, and accessibility of familiar foods shaped students' sense of security and eased cultural transition (S1, S2, S3, S5).

Emotional regulation is closely linked with social and cultural adaptation, as international students employ both proactive and reactive strategies to manage stress. Leisure activities such as travel and cultural exploration serve as stress-relievers while enhancing engagement with the host environment (S2, S3, S5). Positive interactions with locals and peers support emotional stability and coping, whereas negative experiences like housing issues or cultural misunderstandings require adaptive cognitive and behavioural responses (S4, S5). Overall, adaptation is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of social, cultural, and emotional dimensions rather than purely academic adjustment.

Institutional Factors

Additionally, institutional factors such as academic adaptation present their own set of challenges, particularly in relation to differing teaching styles, expectations of student autonomy, and lecturer–student interactions.

Table 6: Institutional factors: Themes and quotes from international student data

Theme	Type of Adaptation	Description	Interview Quotes
Institutional Factors	Academic Adaptation	Adjusting to teaching styles, student autonomy, and lecturer interactions	<p>“I think in terms of the study system, the tasks assigned to students here are much more than I used to face back in Indonesia.” (S2)</p> <p>“Between Iran, Austria, and Malaysia, I choose Malaysia because the students are so close with the lecturers. For example, the lecturers’ and students’ relationships are most likely just like between friends, which cannot be found in my country. We do not call lecturers by their first name. The lecturer also guides me with videos to show me how to get to my laboratory. She also gave me clear instructions about the facilities in the laboratory until I became familiar with it. I am very grateful to the lecturers in Malaysia.” (S1)</p> <p>“In Indonesia, to meet the academicians, even if they are your lecturers, is very hard, which I find is quite a big difference in Malaysia. A consultation with lecturers in Malaysia is super easy especially in terms of booking a meeting or consultation slot. But in Indonesia, to meet your lecturers is like setting a meeting with God, which I find super hard. Malaysia even has its own system, and this is what I really wanted during my study.” (S5)</p> <p>“I found a person that is very helpful to me. She is very caring and supportive in terms of mental well-being and health care. She is my supervisor. Sometimes, I see that she tries to be in my shoes in order to understand my current state. Even when I had a financial situation, she tried to find me a job. But I think all people in Malaysia are very supportive.”(S3)</p>

The data reveals that institutional factors specifically teaching style and sense of responsibility play a pivotal role in shaping the adjustment process. The findings indicate that students encounter challenges related to workload, instructional methods, language of instruction, and accessibility of lecturers and staff, which collectively influence their academic and personal adaptation.

Teaching style and institutional support are central to international students' academic adaptation in Malaysia. Increased workload and rigorous academic expectations require students to develop new study habits and adjust to practical, applied learning, as reflected in S2's and S3's experiences. Language and medium of instruction, particularly the use of Malay language, present initial challenges that can affect comprehension and participation, emphasizing the need for clear communication of instructional norms. Simultaneously, the accessibility and relational support of lecturers and staff facilitate adjustment and help students navigate academic and administrative demands.

The findings illustrate that institutional factors, specifically teaching style and sense of responsibility, are central to academic adaptation. Students must adjust to higher workloads, practical learning approaches, and language requirements while benefiting from relational guidance and accessible support systems. The interplay between structured academic practices and attentive faculty or staff interactions facilitates not only cognitive and procedural adaptation but also emotional reassurance, enabling international students to integrate more effectively into the academic environment. This highlights the importance of cultivating supportive, transparent, and culturally sensitive institutional practices for international student success.

New international students frequently encounter challenges in adjusting to their new living environments and establishing social connections. Before they are able to interact with peers, classmates, or roommates, they must first engage with university staff, beginning at the airport and continuing through campus tours, registration procedures, and assistance with housing or academic concerns. Consequently, staff play a pivotal role in facilitating the international students' smooth transition and adaptation to the new environment. The findings further revealed that staff contributions to the adaptation process can be categorised into two primary dimensions: the work factor, which pertains to their professional responsibilities and institutional roles, and the personal factor, which encompasses the interpersonal and emotional support extended to international students.

These themes are consistent with [Kim's \(2017a, 2017b\)](#) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model, which highlights the interplay between individual resilience and environmental factors in determining the success of cultural adaptation.

University Staff Informants

In addition to international student perspectives, the study explored the experiences and contributions of university staff who engage directly with these students, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural adaptation process from both individual and institutional viewpoints. Thematic analysis of staff interviews revealed two primary domains: work factors and personal factors. Table 7 below summarizes the themes.

Table 7: Themes Emerged for Staff Contributions to International Student Adaptation

Themes emerged	Type of Adaptation	Description
Work Factors	Student management	Hospitality
	Support system	Acculturation process and guidance
Personal Factors	Local adjustment	Early exposure to the new environment, culture and norms.
	Effective communication	Psychological mindset

a. *Work Factors*

Under work factors, staff responsibilities extend beyond formal duties to include managing student arrivals, providing hospitality, addressing practical needs, and maintaining continuous support throughout the acculturation process. These responsibilities encompass both structured institutional support and informal personal engagement, which collectively facilitate academic, social, and cultural adaptation for international students. Table 8 illustrates key contributions of staff as reported by informants.

Table 8: A quotes from the staff informants

Staff ID	Role / Position	Key Actions / Contributions	Context / Examples	Adaptation Factor
SP1	Director of Academic Management Centre	Ensured presence when Middle Eastern male students visited, provided support for female staff, facilitated smooth service	"Sometimes, when a Middle East student comes... I myself will stand behind the female staff. If they insist, a male staff member takes over."	Work Factor – Support System; Cultural & Social Adaptation
SP2	Nerve Centre Staff (Pusat Pengurusan Bencana)	Provided personal guides, hotline support, and campus resources during COVID-19 lockdown	"We were publicizing widely so that they could reach us anytime... helped set up a grocery village on the campus for them."	Work Factor – Support System; Psychological Adaptation
SP4	Staff handling postgraduate research students	Monitored research-mode postgraduate students to prevent MIA (missing in action) cases	"If we do not chase them, these postgraduate students will go MIA for months..."	Work Factor – Student Management; Academic Adaptation
SP5	Teaching staff	Adjusted teaching style and monitored student progress due to institutional responsibility	"If they are not chased, I will be in trouble with the higher-ups. The attendance, the marks, all of that are on me."	Work Factor – Student Management; Academic Adaptation

These findings indicate that staff contributions shape international students' adaptation, encompassing both structured responsibilities and voluntary personal engagement. Support systems such as guidance, hotlines, orientation programs, and peer networks mitigate acculturative stress, promote psychological well-being, and provide a foundation for social and cultural integration. Staff monitoring and proactive interventions, particularly for postgraduate research students, ensure academic continuity and reduce isolation, especially during periods of institutional disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two central sub-themes emerge under work factors: support systems and student management. Support systems include structured orientation, counselling, mental health services, and language support initiatives, which collectively facilitate adjustment to academic and social expectations, improve communication, and foster integration into the local culture. Student management includes academic advising, monitoring progress, emergency response,

and culturally sensitive staff engagement, enabling international students to navigate unfamiliar academic systems effectively.

Peer support mechanisms complement these efforts by providing mentorship, practical guidance, and emotional reassurance, while dedicated help desks for accommodation, immigration, and financial matters reduce administrative burdens. Together, these institutional practices demonstrate the dynamic interplay between formal responsibilities and personal initiative, highlighting the pivotal role of work factors in promoting academic success, psychosocial well-being, and overall adaptation for international students in Malaysia. The findings support this claim, showing that the general, academic, and social adjustment of international students is significantly influenced by both perceived lecturer support and the support of host country nationals (Chan et al., 2021).

b. Personal Factor

Personal factors represent the second major dimension of staff contribution to international students' cultural adaptation and are structured around two interrelated sub-factors namely local adjustment and general issues. Local adjustment is operationalized through early exposure initiatives such as cultural villages, festive celebrations, virtual tours, and participation in campus activities, all of which help students understand Malaysian social norms and daily life. General issues are reflected in staff members' effective communication and culturally sensitive psychological support, including warden assistance, non-judgmental attitudes, and the absence of stereotyping. Collectively, these actions demonstrate how staff interpersonal sensitivity and cultural awareness foster students' emotional security and sense of belonging.

Table 9: Personal factor – staff informant quote

Informant	Sub-factor	Theme	Quote
SP12	Personal Factor (General Issues)	Psychological Mindset & Effective Communication	"The Middle East students were usually from a well-off family, and they are a bit choosy about the facilities. It is like they are preparing to inherit their father's company. So, they have to give a good ambience to study. They want a private room with totally silent surroundings. Sometimes, they knock on my door in the middle of the night just to complain. So, it is my job to calm and reason with them."

The interview with SP12 illustrates the importance of personal initiative in supporting students' adaptation. As a residential fellow, SP12 attended to the culturally specific expectations of Middle Eastern postgraduate students, responding to late-night concerns and providing reassurance. Such informal cultural mediation reduced stress and facilitated psychological and social adjustment. The staff member's voluntary engagement beyond formal duties highlights the role of personal motivation and empathy in easing students' early acculturation challenges.

The findings indicate that staff are often the first point of contact for international students, particularly during critical transitional periods upon arrival. Informal, voluntary contributions by staff driven by intrinsic values rather than institutional mandates, offer early exposure to local culture, foster trust, and enhance students' emotional well-being. In research-mode postgraduate programs, personalized supervisory relationships further strengthen these adaptive processes by providing one-to-one guidance and support. The critical transitional period during international students' initial arrival is particularly shaped

by their interactions with university personnel, especially those in the accommodation office, as well as through their early participation in institutional activities (Ammigan, 2019).

The personal factor theme highlights the voluntary and individual efforts of university staff in supporting international students' adaptation. Unlike formal work responsibilities, these contributions are motivated by personal values, empathy, and hospitality. Staff often take initiative to introduce students to local cultural norms, providing early exposure that facilitates smoother cultural adjustment. In research-mode postgraduate programs, personalized supervisory relationships further enhance academic and emotional support, fostering trust and a sense of security. Local adjustment and effective communication, reflected in the sincerity of interactions and absence of stereotyping, also shape students' perceptions of belonging and overall adaptation. These findings highlight the important role of staff during students' initial transition, operating through both institutional mechanisms and informal support, and suggest that the Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model should formally recognize staff contributions as essential mediators between students and the host culture (Ammigan, 2019).

Integration with Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model

This study aims to critically assess the applicability of Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model in the context of international students enrolled in Malaysian higher education institutions. In particular, it evaluates the extent to which the model accurately reflects the lived adaptation experiences of these students within Malaysia's distinctive sociocultural and institutional environment. The discussion further elaborates on the relevance and adequacy of the model in light of the study's empirical findings.

Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model (2017) is grounded in three fundamental assumptions: first, that human beings possess an inherent capacity and motivation to adapt; second, that adaptation to a social environment occurs primarily through communication; and third, that adaptation is a dynamic, complex, and often stressful process. Central to this model is the role of communication, which functions both as the mechanism and the outcome of adaptation. Individuals are seen to influence, and be influenced by, the host environment through ongoing communicative interactions shaped by personal and ethnic predispositions (Kim, 2001; Kim, 2002). Through repeated exposure to new cultural contexts, individuals gradually modify their communicative behaviours, norms, and expectations in order to function effectively within the host society.

The model conceptualises adaptation as a continuous and evolutionary process rather than a one-time adjustment. It emphasises three interrelated outcomes: functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity. Functional fitness refers to the ability to manage everyday tasks in the host environment; psychological health reflects emotional stability and well-being; while intercultural identity denotes the development of a flexible and inclusive sense of self that integrates elements from both the home and host cultures. These outcomes emerge through the stress–adaptation–growth cycle, in which individuals initially experience cultural stress, such as confusion, anxiety, and frustration, before gradually adapting through learning, interaction, and meaning-making. This cyclical process enables personal growth and deeper intercultural competence over time.

A key determinant of successful adaptation within the model is host communication competence, which comprises cognitive, affective, and operational dimensions. Cognitive competence involves understanding the host language and cultural codes; affective

competence includes openness, empathy, and motivation; while operational competence refers to the ability to enact appropriate behaviours in real-life interactions. These communicative capacities are mediated by individual-level factors such as preparedness for change, personality, and ethnic proximity, as well as environmental factors such as host receptivity, support systems, and opportunities for social interaction. When these conditions align, individuals are more likely to achieve intercultural transformation, characterised by behavioural adjustment and the emergence of a hybrid, interculturally grounded identity.

Kim's (2017) refinement of the model also reflects the realities of global mobility and transnationalism, recognising that cultural identities are increasingly fluid and negotiated across borders. Importantly, the model extends beyond permanent migrants to include temporary sojourners such as international students, expatriates, and professionals. It highlights hybridity, mindful intercultural engagement, and communication as the core drivers of sustainable adaptation in an interconnected world.

In this study, the findings are expected to contribute to a contextualised evolution of Kim's framework by identifying how multiple forces, ranging from institutional structures to individual predispositions, interact within Malaysia's higher education environment. As suggested by Mandari and Boer (2021) and Shafaei et al. (2016), cross-cultural adaptation is not a unilateral process but a collaborative endeavour between international students and the host society. Thus, Kim's model provides a valuable theoretical foundation, while its application in Malaysia necessitates further refinement to capture the sociocultural and institutional complexities shaping international students' adaptation.

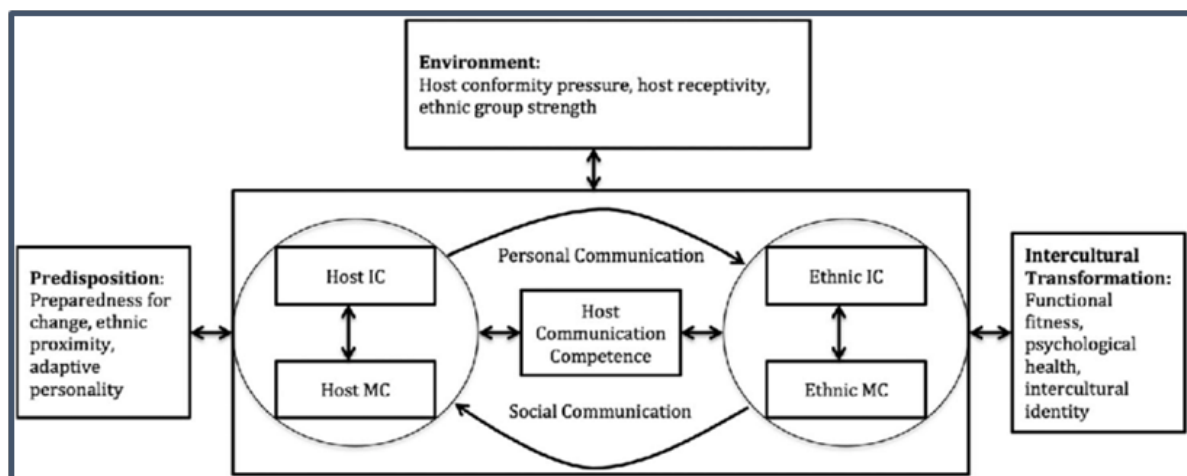


Figure 2: The original model of cross-cultural adaptation by Kim (2017)

Expanding the Western Context Model to Asian Context

Scholars have long questioned the applicability of Western-centric intercultural communication models in Asian contexts, arguing that such frameworks often fail to capture relational, cultural, and epistemological differences. Chen (2009) advocates an Asian-centric, Confucian-based model that foregrounds harmony, relationality, and contextual sensitivity, while Miike (2003, 2006) calls for the decolonisation of communication theory through Asiatic paradigms grounded in indigenous Asian worldviews. Chen (2005) further highlights that Western notions of communication competence inadequately reflect East Asian relational and contextual norms. From a psychological perspective, Tseng (2001) similarly critiques the uncritical transfer of Western constructs across cultures and stresses the need for culturally validated frameworks. Ishii (2004) extends this critique by emphasizing

kanjō-based (emotion-centred) communication rooted in Japanese traditions, reinforcing the need for indigenous conceptualisations. Kim (2002) likewise challenges the presumed universality of Western communication models, arguing that they insufficiently account for high-context, face-saving, and collectivist orientations prevalent in Asian societies.

Against this theoretical backdrop, the present study expands Kim’s (2017) Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model to better reflect Asian realities, particularly within the Malaysian context. Kim’s original model structured around Predisposition, Environment, and Intercultural Transformation was developed largely from Western assumptions about individual agency and communicative adaptation. However, the findings demonstrate that such dimensions do not fully capture the cultural, institutional, and relational dynamics operating in Malaysia’s multicultural and multireligious society, where religion, customs, and collective values strongly shape social life.

The results further highlight the active role of host societies in shaping adaptation experiences, particularly through the ways cultural distinctiveness is presented and mediated. Host responsibilities in managing diversity and cultural encounters vary across regions, with Asian contexts often placing greater emphasis on relational harmony and cultural sensitivity (Nadeem et al., 2022). Mismanagement of cultural differences can intensify misunderstandings rooted in ethnic, religious, and cultural distinctions (Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022), underscoring the need for models that reflect these complexities.

Consequently, this study proposes an expanded framework that introduces seven additional adaptation factors. Two host-side dimensions, the Work Factor and Personal Factor, capture institutional engagement and staff communication competence. Five student-focused dimensions, Cultural, Physical, Academic, Psychological, and Social Adaptation, address the multifaceted ways international students negotiate everyday life in Malaysia. Together, these extensions reposition adaptation as a relational and contextually embedded process rather than solely an individual communicative one.

By integrating culturally grounded, institutional, and psychosocial dimensions, the expanded model responds directly to calls for de-westernising intercultural theory (Chen, 2009; Miike, 2006; Kim, 2002) and provides a more valid framework for understanding adaptation in Asian higher education contexts.

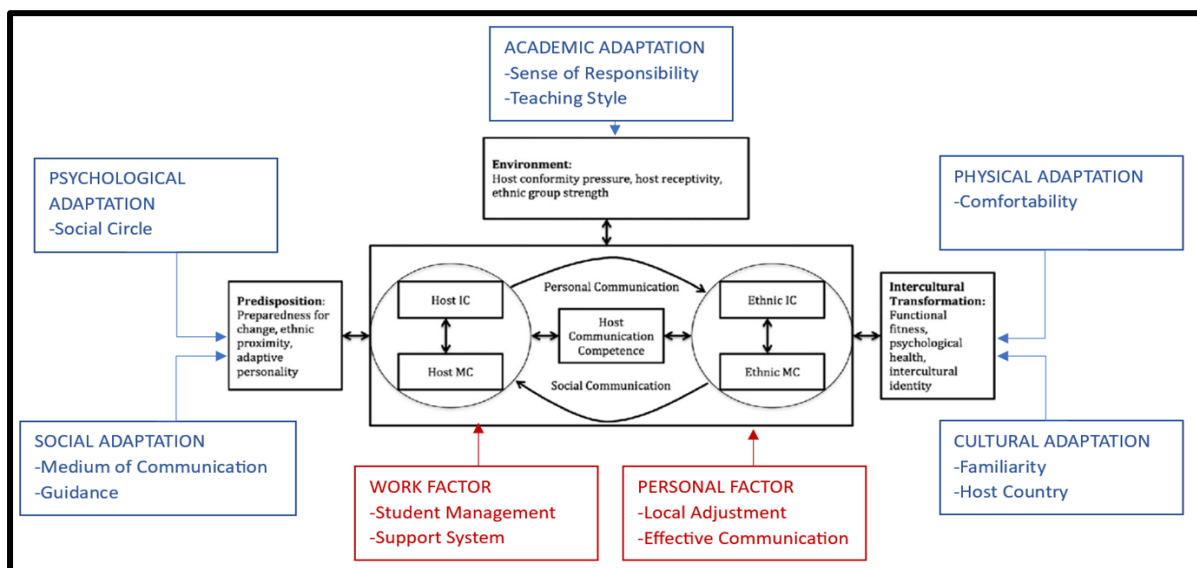


Figure 3: The suggested expansion of the cross-cultural adaptation theory based on the findings

The interview questions were developed based on the original components of Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model. Following the interviews, thematic analysis revealed additional dimensions that were subsequently incorporated into the model. Rather than proposing a new framework, the findings extend Kim's (2017) model by introducing supplementary elements that more accurately reflect the lived experiences of international students in Malaysia. The original "environment factor," comprising host receptivity, host conformity pressure, and ethnic group strength, was expanded into an "institutional factor," which emphasizes the role of the host institution in academic adaptation, particularly through a sense of responsibility and teaching style.

The "intercultural transformation" dimension, consisting of functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity, was further elaborated into two components: physical adaptation and cultural adaptation. Physical adaptation highlights students' comfortability during their stay, while cultural adaptation addresses issues of familiarity, lifestyle, and the host country context. The "predisposition factor" was extended into psychological and social adaptation. Social adaptation includes communication medium and guidance, while psychological adaptation is reflected through students' social circles. Finally, host communication competence was expanded into work and personal factors, encompassing student management, support systems, local adjustment, and effective communication.

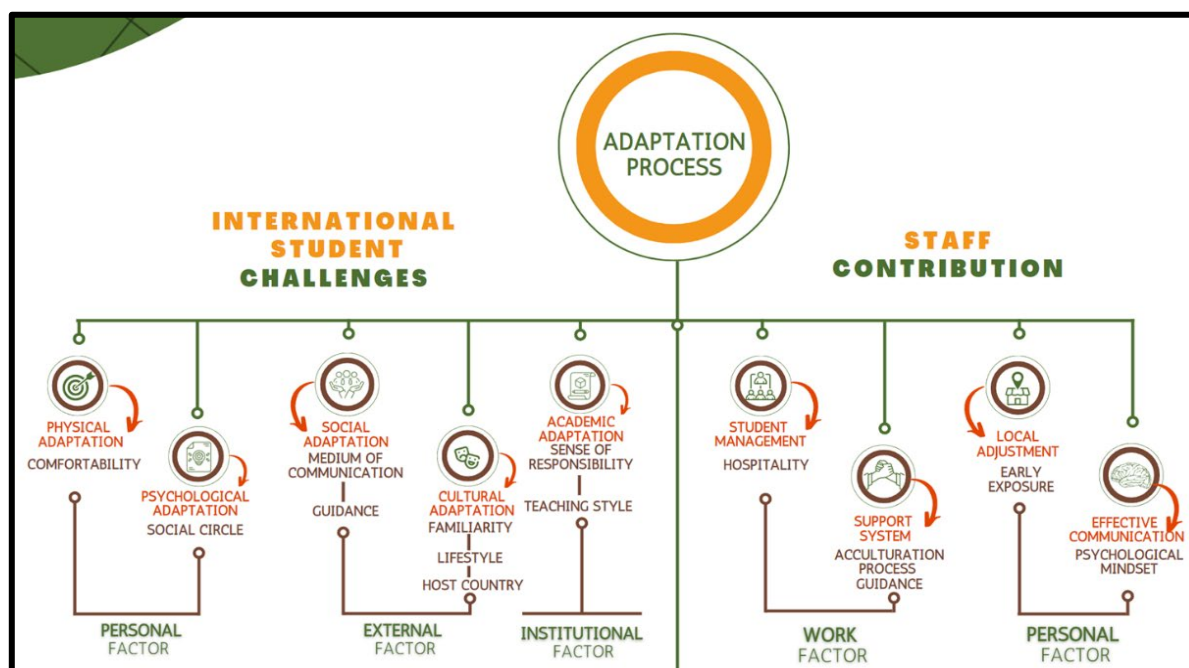


Figure 4: The themes emerged from the findings and embedded into the original model as an expansion of the cross-cultural adaptation theory

The original Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model (Kim, 2017), developed within a Western context, comprises three core factors: Predisposition, Environment, and Intercultural Transformation. While these factors offer a useful foundation, findings from this study indicate that they are insufficient for explaining adaptation in Malaysia, a highly multicultural, multiethnic, and multireligious society. In this context, social and cultural dimensions such as religion, customs, and everyday practices play a more significant role in shaping international students' experiences.

Accordingly, the model was expanded to include seven additional factors: Work, Personal, Cultural Adaptation, Physical Adaptation, Academic Adaptation, Psychological Adaptation, and Social Adaptation. The original Environment factor was extended into an Institutional Factor to capture the influence of teaching style, sense of responsibility, and institutional support. Physical and Cultural Adaptation emerged from Intercultural Transformation, addressing comfort, lifestyle familiarity, and cultural adjustment. Psychological and Social Adaptation developed from Predisposition, highlighting social networks, communication, and emotional well-being. Work and Personal Factors evolved from Host Communication Competence, emphasizing student management, support systems, local adjustment, and effective interpersonal communication.

Rather than replacing the original framework, the expanded model preserves its theoretical structure while enhancing its relevance to Malaysia's collectivist and institutionally embedded sociocultural context. Below is the clear comparative (refer Table 10) between the original Western model and the expanded Malaysian-context version:

Table 10: The comparative between the original Western model of Kim (2017) and the expanded Malaysian-context version

Original Model of Kim,2017 (Western Context)	Expanded Model (Malaysia/Asian Context)	Explanation
Predisposition (Preparedness for change, Ethnic proximity, Adaptive personality)	Psychological Adaptation (Social circle) Social Adaptation (Medium of communication, Guidance)	Psychological and social dimensions are emphasized to reflect the role of emotional well-being and social networks in a multicultural society.
Environment (Host receptivity, Host conformity pressure, Ethnic group strength)	Institutional Factor (Academic adaptation: Sense of responsibility, Teaching style)	Institutions are highlighted as pivotal in the adaptation process, especially in educational settings for international students.
Intercultural Transformation (Functional fitness, psychological health, Intercultural identity)	Physical Adaptation (Comfortability in living conditions) Cultural Adaptation (Familiarity, Lifestyle, Host country culture)	Physical comfort and cultural familiarity are considered essential for successful long-term adaptation.
Host Communication Competence (Ability to communicate with the host culture)	Work Factor (Student management, Support system) Personal Factor (Local adjustment, Effective communication)	The communication process is expanded to include management support and personal adjustment skills crucial in the Malaysian context.

The original model focuses on broad, generalized factors of adaptation mainly applicable to relatively homogenous societies, while the expanded model integrates localized, socio-cultural, institutional, and psychological dimensions, reflecting Malaysia's complex multicultural and multi-ethnic realities. The expansion is not a replacement of the original model but an extension and contextualization to fit the unique demands of Asian, specifically Malaysian, societies.

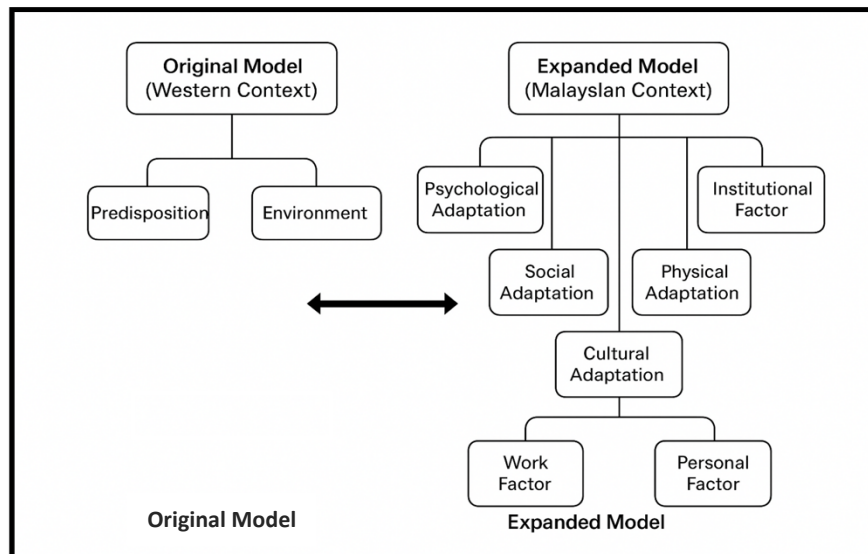


Figure 5: The conceptual map to further illustrate the comparison

The figure above illustrates the adaptation of Kim's (2017) model from a Western to a Malaysian context by incorporating psychological, social, physical, institutional, cultural, work, and personal factors. This expanded framework captures Malaysia's complex sociocultural environment, enabling a more context-sensitive understanding of international students' adaptation processes. This refinement highlights multifaceted adaptation in Malaysia, enabling context-sensitive analysis of international students' experiences.

Critical Discussion: Advancing Theory in Cross-Cultural Adaptation

This study extends Young Yun Kim's Cross-Cultural Adaptation Model by demonstrating that institutional agents and culturally embedded contexts play a more active role in shaping international students' adaptation than originally theorised. While Kim (2017) conceptualises adaptation as a stress–adaptation–growth cycle mediated by communication competence and environmental receptivity, findings show that staff and institutional practices actively co-construct adaptation experiences. University personnel contribute through mentoring, emotional reassurance, and culturally responsive engagement, reducing stress and strengthening psychological security, thereby accelerating adjustment processes beyond passive environmental support.

Institutional mechanisms such as orientation programmes, academic advising, crisis response systems, and student management structures function as structured interventions that reduce acculturative stress and enhance functional competence. In Malaysia, these practices are deeply shaped by relational norms, cultural values, and interpersonal warmth, reflecting culturally situated communication patterns (Chen, 2009; Miike, 2006). This study therefore extends prior research linking campus services to intercultural adjustment (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Li & Gasser, 2005) by demonstrating their relational enactment within a non-Western context.

Emotional regulation also emerges as central to adaptation, with leisure activities, social engagement, and cultural exploration functioning as key coping strategies that enhance psychological resilience. Rather than peripheral factors, these processes are integrated into the adaptation cycle, reinforcing findings from sojourner research (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). Linguistic adaptation further reveals that challenges arise not only from unfamiliar languages but also from closely related linguistic systems, as seen in

misunderstandings between Bahasa Indonesia and Bahasa Melayu, highlighting language as both identity anchor and adaptation mediator (Duff, 2011).

Overall, this study responds to calls to de-Westernise intercultural theory (Chen, 2009; Miike, 2006) by repositioning adaptation as a relational, institutional, and culturally embedded process. It advances the model by incorporating staff as active mediators, expanding environmental dimensions, and integrating emotional and linguistic processes, offering a more contextually grounded framework for understanding international student adaptation in non-Western higher education settings (Kim, 2017; Ward & Kennedy, 1999; Yan & Berliner, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that international postgraduate students in Malaysia show strong adaptability through cultural exposure, social media, and peer networks. Despite institutional and curriculum limitations, most overcome challenges. Extending Young Yun Kim's (2017) model, the study integrates student-institutional dimensions, bridging contexts while some issues such as food adaptation have diminished, psychosocial and academic challenges persist. Future research should focus on undergraduate international students, especially those with longer residence in Malaysia, due to greater adaptation challenges. Comparative studies across disciplines, social media influence on expectations, quantitative validation of frameworks, and staff roles in inclusive support are also recommended to enhance adaptation strategies (Saxena & Jain, 2013; Gakhar & Bains, 2009).

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