



Students and Cultural Issues in International Contexts: The Case of Malaysian International Businesses Students in UK and China

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Research that addresses cultural issues and reactions of Malaysian students pursuing studies overseas are not available. Following a qualitative approach of inquiry, this pioneering study aimed at exploring cultural challenges faced by Malaysian international business students in China and the UK; their adaptation strategies. The paper also aimed at assessing whether there are differences within these two contexts in terms of challenges. The findings showed that in both contexts, student's face a number of issues, such as unavailability of halal food, communication (intonation and misinterpretation) toilet design and use, and lack of spaces to perform prayers. Some of these issues suggest that students need to have better preparation before departing abroad. However, in the UK we found evidence of cases related to mis-perception against Muslims, while language barriers and misconceptions over Muslim scarf (Hijab) were more common in China. Implications and recommendation were discussed in the paper.

Key words: *international students, business, Malaysia, Culture, UK, China.*



Introduction

Like many countries in the world, Malaysia's economy is increasingly globalizing; witnessing, therefore, the considerable inflow and outflow movements of people (Mosbah and Khuja, 2014; Mosbah and Abd-Wahab, 2018; Mosbah et al., 2018). Education-wide, universities in Malaysia, particularly in the private sector, are offering short term international education to their students in order to fit them to the global requirements in the job market. Indeed, this trend goes in line with the substantial growth in the number of international higher education students (Yu and Wright, 2016), especially among business schools and accreditation organization that are pushing for better students' interest in international study experiences (Vernon et al., 2017). This is also expected to intensify due to higher education competition in the country (Migin et al., 2015; Hamd and Normy, 2018). Malaysia' Management and Science University (MSU) is one of the private universities in the country that gives their students opportunities of internationalization. The university developed two main internationalization programs known as the Global Mobility Program (GMP) and the Global Leadership Program (GLP).

In the former program, students can study abroad for 1 or a few semesters. For this, the university has academic ties with over 40 partner institutions worldwide (MSU website). The second program, known as the Global Leadership Program (GLP), prepares students to enhance their study experience, gain additional leadership skills and become leaders with a global mindset. The program provides students with opportunities to develop important leadership skills and allows them to engage various competency forms of studying, volunteering and participating in activities overseas. MSU has a wide presence in Malaysia with the main campus located in Shah Alam. It also has 10 local branches known as "MSU colleges" which offer different Sijil and Diploma level courses (MSU college website). In the last years, the university established offshore branches in Bangalore (India), Colombo (Sri Lanka), and Jakarta (Indonesia), as well as learning centres in Cambodia, China, Vietnam, Central Asia, and the Middle East. The main university teaches undergraduate and postgraduate studies and is currently home to 10 faculties and schools. The faculty of business and management is one of the biggest departments as it hosts a high number of students.

While students in general may face cultural problems abroad, students taking international business programs are expected to show a better understanding of international cultures compared to students of other programs; essentially for two reasons. First, by taking many subjects, particularly "international management", "international Business", "International finance" and "international logistics" that expose them to inter-country variations in many



terms including culture and currency variations and fluctuations. Second, since these students are expected to fill different positions in MNCs, they may demonstrate better awareness towards knowing/studying different aspects of life particularly in target destinations. Therefore, we believe that cultural challenges that are likely to face international business students from Malaysia abroad will be more acutely faced by non-international business counterparts. Hence the importance of this study.

So far, there exists some research on the nexus of international students and culture (Zhou et al., 2008; Obi & Okekeokosisi 2018), however, little is known about international business students and specifically about Malaysian students pursuing their studies overseas. This is surprising given the number of Malaysians who prefer to experience and international study programs. To the best knowledge of the authors, no single study is available in the Malaysian literature in regard to this matter. Therefore, this study emerges as an attempt towards filling this gap, and aims to generate evidence on cultural challenges facing Malaysian international business students overseas as well as their adaptation strategies. The study also seeks to know whether there are students' perception and behavioural differences within two different cultures, namely the UK (western culture) and China (Eastern culture). The study insights will be very important given that cultural challenges impact student perception and satisfaction on the learning experiences (Li and Campbell, 2006).

Cultural challenges and adoption strategies of students: a literature review

University students pursuing study programs in cultures that are different from their own face social and educational institutions, behaviours, expectations, and need to deal with the different adjustment issues. These issues are exacerbated for newcomers who have minimal awareness or experiences over cultural difference between the host society and the home country (Zhou et al., 2008). The effect of such unfamiliar experiences on cross-cultural travellers, including international students, is termed 'culture shock' (Zhou et al., 2008). This notion covers a wide range of psychological and social reactions to involvement in another culture, many of them damaging communication. However, reducing the harmful effects of culture shock can be achieved through strategies like: access to the right information, cultural awareness, isomorphic attribution, learning by doing, and social skills training. The latter is arguably advanced as most effective (Furnham, 1993).

Unlike in the field of expatriation, where a good body of knowledge assesses cultural issues, reactions and outcomes, evidence on how international students perceive and behave within a foreign country culture haven't reached a satisfactory level. Students may show distinguished perception and behavioural patterns, with respect to foreign cultures, than other groups of



travellers and migrants. In fact, some scholars argue that the mainstream literature on culture may not capture the dynamism of cultural experiences as showcased in the context of international students (see. E.g. Sliwa and Grandy, 2006).

While dissimilarities between cultures may lead to interpersonal and intrapersonal conflicts among international students (Alavi and Mansor, 2011; Promsri, 2018), cultural shock can, on the other hand, lead to serious psychosocial difficulties and mental health problems (Hamboyan and Bryan, 1995). In fact, culture issues, including poor proficiency in the host country language, were found to be primary factors influencing the adjustment and academic performance of international students (Andrade, 2006). As such, the link between culture and international students' preferred learning style tend to decrease over time and local and international students converge in their learning styles (Charlesworth, 2007).

In the UK context, Brown and Holloway (2007) found that during the initial stage students are overwhelmed by negative symptoms that are commonly associated with culture shock more than they feel excitement. Attached to this, social concerns were also identified as a most disturbing problem among international students (Leung, 2001; Alavi and Mansor, 2011; Puteri, 2018). However, with reference to Asian students overseas, Li and Campbell (2006), identified a number of culture-related challenges that appeared to hinder students learning process and academic performance such as; language barriers and cultural discrepancies, intercultural communication barriers, unfamiliarity with the classroom interaction system, lack of knowledge on the New Zealand academic norms and conventions, and inadequate learning support. Newsome and Cooper (2016) traced Asian international students' personal journeys through a three-stage process that passes from: (1) high preliminary expectations, through (2) culture shock, to (3) several forms of accommodation. Since culture shock results also from inherently stressful life realities (Zhou et al., 2008), it then become necessary for students to adapt to a new culture (Sherry et al., 2010).

International students must seek an attitudinal and behavioural balance between the two cultures (Lin and Yi, 1997). Zhou et al. (2008) suggest students to be resilient, and develop coping strategies, whereas Gu et al. (2009) argues that management of language proficiency, personal development, social interaction and academic outcomes is what leads to intercultural adaptation and successful establishment of 'identity'. Similarly, Yu and Wright (2016) conclude with the importance of international students' integration into the community and with other students and relationships to adjustment and attain academic satisfaction. These issues are not well understood among Malaysian students pursuing study programs overseas particularly in distant cultures. Therefore, question related to the kind of cultural issues faced



by Malaysian students abroad and how students deal with them lack answers. This study aims to furnish relevant answers.

Methods and sample description

This study relied on in-depth qualitative data collected through open ended questions from 9 informants (8 students in Bachelor in International Business who pursued a minimum of 1 semester study overseas within two distinct cultures: the UK (western culture) and China (Eastern culture), and 1 PHD students involved in a UK university) as well as from 3 mentors/lecturers who used to accompany international business students in academic trips overseas. Among the sampled students, 4 studied in the UK and 5 others in China. The questions were designed to generate rich information on two different issues namely; cultural challenges and adaptation strategies. The informants were approached using in the convenience sampling technique. Participating students provided an important bulk of information. Data were collected from students within the period of 11 to 23 October 2018, and from mentors between 14-18 November 2018.

We consider that the size of our sample is good enough to generate data based on which reliable conclusions could be generated. While any qualitative-oriented researchers consider sample size not to be an issue in qualitative research (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2005), The rule of data saturation can be met through two interview cases. In fact, one in-depth case is likely to yield an understanding that expands knowledge in the constructivist approach of research (Boddy, 2016). Thematic analysis was used in this study; following the approach developed by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003).

Table 1 shows that the informants are aged between 20 and 23 years old except for the only PHD student who is 43 years old. The sample also include 2 Indian students and 8 Malay students. In the meanwhile, most students reported that they only sometimes faced cultural problems, while one respondent indicated that he had never faced a problem when studying in China, two students said that have faced cultural problems frequently. The three mentors on the other hand, were all Malays, they accompanied students for academic trips to many countries in the region, and their experience in teaching international business ranges from 2 years (Minimum) to more than 12 years.

Table 1: description of participating students

INF	Ethnicity	Age	Religiou sness (1-5 scale)	Open- mindedness/ Tolerance (1- 5 scale)	Country of study	Frequency of cultural problems encountered	Awareness of cultural differences
INF1	Indian	20 - 23	3	5	UK	Sometimes	No
INF2	Indian		3	5	UK	Sometimes	Yes
INF3	Malay		4	5	UK	Sometimes	Yes
INF4	Malay		3	5	China	Frequently	Yes
INF5	Malay		4	5	China	Never	Yes
INF6	Malay		2	3	China	Frequently	No
INF7	Malay		4	4	China	Sometimes	Yes
INF8	Malay		3	5	China	Sometimes	Yes
INF9 (PHD)	Malay	43	5	5	UK	Sometimes	Yes
Mentors		Ethnicity	Length of IB subjects' teaching experience	Countries visited under academic trips	Frequency of accompanying students overseas		
Mentor 1		Malay	2 years	Indonesia, Vietnam	3 trips		
Mentor 2		Malay	5+ years	Cambodia, Vietnam China	3 or more trips		
Mentor 3		Malay	12+ years	Cambodia, Thailand Indonesia, India, China, Vietnam, Singapore	Dozens of trips		

INF = Informant

Results and discussions

Cultural challenges and adaptation strategies

Similar to findings available in the literature, our students face many cultural problems that are likely to hinder their academic focus and performance, not least in their overall study experience. The main culture challenges identified in this study are: access to halal food, Muslim female hijab (scarf), language barriers, communication (intonation and



misinterpretation) toilet design and use, absence of space where to perform prayers, punctuality as well as scepticism against Muslim identity.

Language barriers

This challenge is seen in both countries but with much varying degrees. In the UK, it is revealed that although our students have good English, they reported issues related to understanding the British accent. In China, a country where English is not very common, language barriers and overall communication is acute. Thus, in addition to difficulties encountered in finding people able to communicate in English especially outside campuses, many those who do, including some lecturers, have uncommon English accent that necessitate time and efforts for students to capture the meanings and familiarize with it.

According to mentors who have accompanied students in many trips to other countries where English is not spoken such as Vietnam and Indonesia, the same linguistic challenge prevails. In the case of Indonesia, language is often not a problem but slight issues may emerge and students need some time to get familiar with intonation and the accompanying body language. Haniffa (2002) contends that Malaysia and Indonesia are different in many cultural aspects because their societal values have been shaped by uncommon factors. Such argument suggests therefore that the emerging problem within similar culture may be beyond language. Mentor 1 says in this regard:

“even in the case on Indonesia, word and tone have different meaning, while it hasn’t got them into trouble, but it does have lengthen the time taken in dealing with the local”.

While it is relatively easier for students going to the UK to familiarise themselves with the British accent by referring to different types of media and social media, the same easiness is not applicable to Chinese/mandarin language. In the meanwhile, getting to have basics of a destination country language is reported to be efficient. Informants 7 and 8 have both explained this concern and provided advice to future students going overseas. In the following statement, the later informant emphasized the importance of learning basic local language in facilitating communication with host country people:

“... [My adaptation in terms of language] was nothing much as I have basic mandarin because I studied at Chinese school. It really helped me to communicate with locals.”



Unavailability of Halal food

This challenge was reported by students in the UK and China. This is simply because Muslims are a minority in both countries. We argue here that inter-regional variations exist in each county and students who enrol in campuses located far from Muslim areas will encounter more difficulties to find Halal food. The example below, reported by informant 3, shows that others may be aware of Muslim food requirements albeit with biases;

“A classmate from Italy invited me to have lunch with the rest and I asked him where are we going since it's really hard to find Halal food in Twickenham and he replied with, we're going to a Vietnamese restaurant. Soon, I found out the restaurant doesn't serve any Halal meat so, I choose not to eat there and he was very confused and sad at that time. He then said "I know you can't eat the meats in UK, and that is why I searched for this Asian restaurant so, we could eat together." At that time, he thought that since I'm an Asian, I could simply eat at any Asian restaurants in the UK”

To overcome halal food issues, students can often follow two strategies including cooking and bringing some local food stuffs. This is efficient for short term students. For long term students, this may have an effect as students can use brought sustenance at least until they adjust overseas and/or find alternative methods of cooking and identifying halal food premises. Information received from the respondents embeds direct and indirect connotations towards these ideas.

Misconception over Muslim scarf (Hijab)

Particularly in Chinese context, Muslim females' hijab (Scarf) appeared to be a source of amazement. Informant 4 who went to China with a group of Malaysian classmates said:

“we were wearing hijab and they were looking at us weirdly. Some even take pictures of those who are wearing hijab..... they thought that wearing hijab because I am bald and wearing hijab make me feel cooler since it was hot in summer there, its”.

The perception of Chinese from mainland China, on the hijab, seems to be also shared with Chinese overseas; perhaps owing to the fact that the Chinese society is less exposed to foreigners. Informant 3 has also reported the same thing:



“One of my friend from China asked me why are you wearing a scarf, but your other Muslim friend doesn't? Isn't it like an obligation in your religion”.

Sceptical perception towards Muslims

In some instances, students, particularly female students who are more likely to be identified as Muslims, can be subject to hatred. Informant 9 reported the following story which shows risks associated with negative reactions of local as well as

“one day, while my friend and me walking home from the University at night, one guy (riding a bike) shouted at us and expressed his hate to Islam. right after that, some other local guys approached us, consoled us and even accompanied us home. Both of them told us that don't be afraid of the maniac that shouted at us earlier. "he is insane" he told us.... that was the only hateful occasion that I faced in UK”. The same informant urges Muslim students in UK to “always walk in group.... you need to live in a community, not by yourself”.

One way to overcome issues like this is to move in groups especially at night or in unpopulated places. Emphasizing this practice indirectly, Both Informant 6 in the Chinese context and Informant 9 in the UK context recommend future Malaysian students going overseas to try to be always accompanied by others for safer displacement:

“Always be with your friends because you are far from your family, don't be alone”

Understanding of foreign culture

Overall, the level of our students understanding over the destination country culture may range from average to high (Ziemianczyk, Krakowiak-Bal, and Peszek, 2017). This fact depends on factors such as the extent of cultural similarities and closeness between the destination culture and the home country culture, individual understanding of students (probably through what they learn in class and through their own research), cultural explanation from counsellors and tour guides upon arrival abroad, international business knowledge on cross-cultures. The latter factor was emphasized by Mentor 3:

“Students understanding of destination country culture is fundamental as they would understand one or two cultural dimensions models they learnt in class.... cultural



dimension models help guiding students overseas. If unsure [of a certain situation and reaction], students need not to initiate [engage], they just wait and see”

Mentor 1 recommends students to widen their knowledge on this by using their own research. Mentor 2, on the other hand, sees that the general understanding is not very satisfying. He attributes this to the fact that students are usually interested to finish their academic and other associated activities. These realities are respectively captured in the following statements:

“In general they [student] didn’t have significant cultural issue, as there is culture similarity between us and Indonesia and Vietnam. Students are always briefed by the tour guide about the country and its culture beforehand, but I feel that they probably need to do research on their own too..... mostly knowing the basic dos and don’ts are just enough to avoid complication when they are in the host country. In Vietnam for example, students were taught on how to properly negotiate with the store when they want a discount..... case studies and discussion are keys to increase cultural awareness among students, we discuss about the host country, their practices and origin, and the dos and don’ts”.

“I would say that the understanding of majority of the students towards the culture of the country of destination before they depart is average, since the preparation is focusing more on completing the task given on the destination but not towards on the culture... [for students going overseas as part of a certain subject completion] students who have high cultural awareness are those with high interest in the subject. They put additional effort to learn more about the differences between the host and home country.”

Previous travelling experience was found as a main factor through which students further their understanding and perceptions over foreign cultures (Rebisz, 2010). Informant 3 and Informant 9 who showed good levels of awareness and adjustment have both, respectively, reported earlier exposure to foreign cultures through travelling.

“I have been to many countries before this; Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, China etc. So, I’ve learned to adapt myself and I’m more interested to know about their cultures instead”

“I been to many places before, besides I am international business lecturer myself”. Being a lecturer of international business however, increases awareness over world cultures since international business programs pays attentions to country difference in various aspects



including culture. Inter-country variations in cultures and the two underpinning ideologies known as “collectivism” in Eastern cultures and “Individualism” in Western cultures are often taught to international business students.

Other adaptation strategies

Other important adaptation strategies used by the students sampled in our study include: avoidance of suspicious behaviours and suspicious situations, and communication with host country people. With reference to the first, Informant 4 recommends other students overseas:

“Try to not act in suspicious manner or engage in suspicious behaviours”.

Some of these concepts, reflecting tendency for risk avoidance, were also captured in the sayings of Informant 3 along the tips she gives to future students going abroad:

“Walk fast, always stay on the right lane when you're riding up the escalator, be punctual for class/meetings/events, bring your own eco-friendly bag when you want to shop, do not wet the toilets”

Such method is indeed good to avoid falling in culturally disturbing behaviours. However, it does not guarantee safe actions, especially when students are the one initiating the action not as reactors to other actions. People tend to define what right or wrong behaviours based on their own cultural values. Thus, this strategy is therefore may only work when there is certain understanding of the host culture and its core values. Similarly, Informant 7 reported the following:

“I find it safe for my adaptation not to do (proactively) anything. I just follow the flow and watch”.

Malays who represent the majority ethnic group in the country and in our sample (9 out of 11) have high uncertainty and risk avoidance; an attributes that is reflected in conflict avoidance, non-assertiveness and attitudes towards ambiguities (Abdullah, 1992, Haniffa, 2002)

In regards to communication with the host country community members, students have to improve communication skills. Proactive approach of communication can be very important in building ties with host country individuals (a.k.a. weak ties). There enough evidence in the migration literature to suggest positive impact on weak ties with Mainstream individuals facilitating the integration and the daily life of foreigners. While many informants



emphasized this concern, Informant 9 in particular adds on pro-activeness in explaining one culture values and practices to others:

“Those foreigners are mostly open minded and can accept the explanation... I normally will explain to the foreigners (on the limitation of shaking hand/hugging, wearing shoes in the house) and they will understand. I also prepared a "shoes sock" if they want to enter my house”

Therefore, it appears that perception towards other are a prerequisite for successful bridging to the mainstream population., Part of this type of communication is to seek guidance from the local people. Informant 3 reports:

“I'll usually will seek some guidance from the citizens there and I would ask for help if I was ever confused with something. Then, I will try my best to follow their steps and explore more new things on my own”.

In line with this tendency, Mentor 1 recommends future students to adopt the following:

“if you have the opportunity, making local friend is the best way to get guidance on the local culture. Beside that if you have any difficulty there, you can get help from your host country friend to help you ease the problem”

Differences between the UK and China.

Students seem to have faced more and acute cultural challenges in China than in the UK. The only two students that reported frequent cultural problem were enrolled in China. This is particularly true for language barrier and reactions over the Muslim female hijab. In the case of the Hijab for instance, many Chinese in mainland China are not aware of what the hijab represents for Muslims and for what purpose Muslims wear it. However, when students are identified as Muslim individuals, they were subject to more scepticism in the UK than in China. This issue is not surprising given the portrayed image of Muslims in western media and the subsequent reactions in the aftermath of 9/11 (Haddad, 2007, Disha et al., 2011; Alsultany, 2012).

Overall, there are no substantial differences in what student face across both destination, but given the important role of English in academia nowadays, more related issues are faced in China. This evidence implies perhaps that Malaysian students (excluding Malaysian-Chinese students who are not considered in this study) face more cultural problems in China and non-



English or Malay speaking countries than in the UK and other English-speaking countries. Thus, the importance of language.

There are at least *three reasons* on why Malaysian students facing less cultural challenges in UK. First, colonial ties between the UK and Malaysia led to Malaysians being good English speakers; thus empowering them with crucial communication tool. Second, specifically in the case of Islam, the spread of Muslim communities across different regions in the UK (Fetzer and Soper, 2005) added to the overall understanding of the UK people towards Islamic values and expectations. Third, the degree of openness and globalization of the UK society accompanied with historical and continuing migration inflows resulted in a multiethnic society where intercultural understanding is shared among the various groups. Some of the aforementioned effects were captured in the sayings of Informant 9 who studied in the UK when asked about her awareness of cultural differences between Malaysian and the UK:

“nothing much different because, UK people are more opened towards foreigners”

Conclusion and recommendation

In this paper we explored the issue of overseas culture as faced by business students. Our paper was particularly interested in exploring and reaching new insights on the cultural challenges facing Malaysian international business students who pursue certain academic paths overseas, their adaptation strategies, and the likelihood of showing different perception and behavioural differences within two regions; the UK (western-distant culture) and China (Eastern-relatively close culture). Our qualitative analysis showed that in both contexts, students face a number of issues such as unavailability of halal food, communication (intonation and misinterpretation) toilet design and use, and lack of spaces to perform prayers. Some of these issues suggest that students need to have better preparation before departing abroad. However, in the UK we found evidence of experienced cases related to scepticism against Muslim identity, while language barriers and misconceptions over the Muslim scarf (Hijab) were more common in China.

Given that international business students are supposed to display a better understanding of cultural differences and cultural challenges, findings highlighted in this study will apply to non-IB students as well. As such, universities and high-education ministries that are sending students can also benefit from the evidence reported here. Students in particular need to be more serious in increasing their awareness over the culture of the destination country and how it differs from that of the home country. Many avenues could be tapped to result in enhanced understanding. Peers, former visitors and students, use of social media, develop



acquaintances with host country citizens before departure, and visit the embassy or the consulate of the destination country in the home country. This process would yield many advantages including the optimization of the decisions related to the choice of the right university at the right country with the most affordable resources.

The results of this study may challenge the conventional understanding, suggesting that intra-regional cultures (within eastern cultures and within-western cultures) variations could be less compared to inter-regional cultures. This study suffered two weaknesses. First, the study focused mostly on students who enrolled for a short term study (1 semester) overseas; long term program students may suffer more cultural problems. Second, the 3 mentors from whom information was collected have not experienced academic trips to the UK and other western countries. Thus, although the insights they provided on students' interaction with foreign cultures are useful, they may lack rigor since these insights probably covers the Chinese context well but not the UK cultural context. Thus, future researchers may need to overcome these weaknesses by looking into students who undertake long term courses abroad.



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Appendix1: Open-ended questions

International Business Students	Mentors
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Please list down ALL the CULTURAL challenges that faced you when you were studying overseas.- What are the most embracing CULTURAL challenges, actions and/or misunderstanding that happened to you overseas. Please give details of what happened exactly and how it happened.- How distant is the culture of the host country (country where you studied) compared to the home culture (Malaysian culture)? Please describe in DETAILS and give EXAMPLES.- How often you faced cultural problems while studying overseas?- Before you travel overseas to study, were you aware about the nature of the host country's culture as well as possible cultural differences and problems that may face you?- After you arrived there and realized cultural differences, what did you do to adapt yourself to the cultural behaviors of that country and avoid committing/falling into cultural misconduct and conflict? Please explain ALL the actions and strategies you applied.- List ALL the advice tips in terms of culture that you can give to other Malaysian students who want to go to study in the same country before they depart from here?- Some Malaysian students may not have enough awareness about the culture of the country they visit. what do you think they need to do when they start facing cultural problems?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- What cultural challenges BIB students usually face overseas?- Usually, what is the level of BIB students understanding on the culture of the country of destination before they depart?- Overall, to what extent they are aware of the cultural differences between the receiving country and the home country?- How do you guide them in terms of cultural understanding, behaviors and ESPECISALLY adjustment?- What tips/advice you could give to future BIB students willing to study overseas and WHY?