

Navigating New Horizons: Cross-Cultural Adaptation Phases of International Students in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study explores the cross-cultural adaptation of international students in Malaysia, aiming to identify the distinct phases they experience and the challenges of their adjustment. This employed a quantitative methods approach, by using surveys to gather data from international students across various Malaysian higher education institutions. Findings reveal a progression through adaptation phases, including honeymoon phase, culture shock, adjustment, and adaptation. The study underscores the pivotal role of institutional support and intercultural training in facilitating smoother transitions for international students. The findings from such studies serve as essential references for prospective international students considering Malaysia or similar multicultural contexts for their education. By gaining a deeper understanding of the cultural adaptation process, the international students can better prepare for the cultural transitions they may encounter, enhancing their ability to navigate new environments effectively and enriching their overall educational experience.

Keywords: Cross-cultural Adaptation Phases, The Challenges of Cultural Adaptation, International Students, Malaysia

Introduction

The increasing globalization of higher education has led to a significant rise in the number of international students pursuing studies abroad. Malaysia, known for its diverse cultural landscape and strong educational institutions, has become a preferred destination for students from various countries (Zhao, Osman, Omar & Yaakup, 2023). While studying abroad

presents numerous academic and professional opportunities, it also requires international students to navigate a complex process of cultural adaptation (Xue & Singh, 2025).

Cross-cultural adaptation refers to the process through which individuals adjust to a new cultural environment, often involving emotional, psychological, and social transitions (Bourdage, Narme, Neeskens, Papma & Franzen, 2024). Scholars such as Rohman, Omar, Rahman & Siwok (2023) and Xiaohan & Yu (2025) have outlined key phases of cross-cultural adaptation, including the honeymoon phase, culture shock, adjustment, and adaptation. International students in Malaysia undergo these stages as they encounter new customs, languages, social norms, and academic expectations (Rohman, Ashari & Johari, 2024). The adaptation process can be influenced by factors such as language proficiency, social support, individual resilience, and institutional assistance (Wenyan, Radzi & Omar (2023).

By understanding the different phases of cross-cultural adaptation is essential for international students in Malaysia, as each phase presents unique challenges and opportunities that significantly impact their academic success and personal well-being. The initial honeymoon phase is characterized by excitement and fascination with the new environment (Amol, Pradana, Setiawan & Amol, 2025). However, this often transitions into the culture shock phase, where the international students may experience confusion, frustration, and homesickness due to unfamiliar social norms and academic expectations (Miao & Zhang, 2024). Recognizing this phase is crucial, as it allows for timely support interventions to mitigate potential negative effects on students' mental health and academic performance. Based on the previous research, majority of international students will progress to the adjustment phase, they begin to develop coping strategies, establish social networks, and gain a better understanding of the host culture (Cao, Meng, & Zhang, 2024; Lu et al., 2024). This phase is pivotal, as successful navigation through it leads to the adaptation phase, where international students achieve a sense of belonging and can function effectively in the new cultural context. Research indicates that students who reach this stage exhibit improved academic outcomes and greater overall satisfaction with their international education experience (Zhen & Keat, 2025).

Despite Malaysia's multicultural setting, which may ease adaptation for some, many international students still face challenges such as homesickness, academic pressure, communication barriers, and social integration difficulties (Rohman et al., 2023; Xiaohan & Yu, 2025). Understanding the phases of cultural adaptation and the factors that influence this process is crucial for higher education institutions to develop effective support systems that enhance the well-being and academic success of international students (Rui & Wahab, 2022). This study aims to examine the cross-cultural adaptation phases among international students in Malaysia. The significance of studying the cross-cultural adaptation phases may beneficial towards international students in Malaysia extends beyond academic interest through integrated to the holistic cultural adaptation and the strategic advancement of Malaysian higher education institutions. The findings from this study on the cross-cultural adaptation phases of international students in Malaysia offer valuable insights that can serve as references for other international students planning to study in Malaysia or similar multicultural contexts. Other than that, other international students also can gain a deeper understanding of the adaptation process, enabling them to navigate their new environments more effectively and enhance their overall educational experience in Malaysia.

Research Question

- (i) What are the phases of cross-cultural adaptation experienced by international students in Malaysia?

Research Objective

- (ii) To examine the phases of cross-cultural adaptation experienced by international students in Malaysia.

Literature Review

Cross-cultural Adaptation among International Students

The global expansion of higher education has led to a significant increase in the number of students pursuing academic opportunities abroad. Every year, millions of international students leave their home countries to study in unfamiliar cultural environments, seeking academic growth, career opportunities, and personal development (Cao, Meng & Zhang, 2024). While this experience can be enriching and life-changing, it also presents a unique set of challenges that go beyond academics (Hu, 2024). One of the most critical challenges these students face is cross-cultural adaptation.

Cross-cultural adaptation for international students refers to the psychological, social, and academic adjustments they must make when living and studying in a host country with different cultural norms, communication styles, and values (Di et al., 2022). This process can involve overcoming language barriers, adjusting to new teaching and learning styles, understanding unfamiliar social customs, and managing feelings of isolation, anxiety, or homesickness (El Boubekri & Saidi, 2022). The adaptation journey is often influenced by factors such as cultural distance, personality traits, language proficiency, social support systems, and previous international exposure (Chu & Zhu, 2023).

For international students, the initial phase of excitement and curiosity about the new environment is quickly followed by feelings of culture shock like confusion, frustration, or even distress caused by the vast differences between their home culture and the host culture. However, over time, most international students begin to adjust, forming new relationships, developing cultural competence, and finding a balance between maintaining their own identity and embracing aspects of the new culture (Khairani, Manalu & Ayun, 2023).

Previous researchers stated that understanding cross-cultural adaptation is essential for educational institutions, as the ability of international students to adapt effectively is closely linked to their academic performance, emotional well-being, and overall success (Zhang, Chen & Shi, 2022; Cao, Zhang & Meng, 2023; Hu, 2024). In this context, universities and colleges play a crucial role in supporting this transition by providing orientation programs, mental health resources, language support, and opportunities for intercultural interaction.

In today's interconnected world, fostering successful cross-cultural adaptation not only benefits the international students themselves but also enriches the academic community by promoting diversity, inclusion, and global citizenship. Therefore, studying the process of cross-cultural adaptation among international students is key to building supportive, culturally aware educational environments that empower students to thrive in a global context.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Phases

Cross-cultural adaptation is a complex process that international students undergo when adjusting to life in a new country. The four key phases of cultural adaptation, which are **Honeymoon, Culture Shock, Adjustment, and Adaptation that will** reflect their evolving experiences in the host country

Honeymoon Phase

Upon arrival in the host country, international students frequently experience excitement and curiosity (Khairani, Manalu & Ayun, 2023). For instance, a student from Vietnam studying in the U.S. might find the diverse campus life, new cuisines, and different teaching styles exhilarating. This initial period is characterized by enthusiasm and a positive outlook toward the new surroundings (Aladegbaiye, Jong & Beldad, 2023). The novelty of Malaysian culture, including its diverse ethnicities, cuisines, and traditions, can be exhilarating (Dias, 2024). For instance, students may enjoy exploring local festivals, trying new foods, and experiencing the country's multicultural atmosphere.

Culture Shock Phase

As the novelty wears off, the international students may face challenges such as language barriers and unfamiliar academic expectations (Corlateanu, 2024). For example, international students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) have reported experiencing culture shock due to differences in social interactions and academic practices. This difference led to confusion and discomfort until they adjusted to the new academic culture (Nguyen, 2024).

Adjustment Phase

Over time, the international students begin to develop coping strategies and a better understanding of the host culture (Ali, 2022). They start to build social connections, improve language skills, and become more comfortable with academic and social expectations (Chi & Gu, 2024). For instance, an international student from Middle East studied in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, initially struggled with local customs but eventually adapted by learning the language and forming friendships with local students.

Adaptation Phase

In this final phase, the international students achieve a level of comfort and integration within the host culture included local friends, foods, academic environment, language and local activities (Zhang & Li, 2022). They can function effectively, appreciate cultural differences, and maintain a balanced perspective between their original and new cultural identities. For example, students in Melbourne, Australia, reported that they eventually felt at ease with the academic system and social life, leading to a more fulfilling study abroad experience.

Methodology

Research Instrument

This study employed a qualitative method approached. Through quantitative analysis, this study used questionnaire to systematically examine the cross-cultural adaptation phases of international students in Malaysia. The research process began with the development of data collection instruments, primarily a questionnaire survey. The questionnaire items were

adopted from **Jamal & Wok (2020)**, which specifically assess cultural adaptation in the host country.

The **questionnaire** consisted of **five sections**, (1) Demographics Respondent, (2) Honeymoon Phase, (3) Culture Shock Phase, (4) Adjustment Phase, (5) Adaptation Phase. Each phase of cultural adaptation was measured using a **five-point likert-scale**, ranging from **1 (Strongly Disagree)** to **5 (Strongly Agree)**.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

This study employed **online questionnaire distribution** as the primary method for quantitative data collection. This approach was deemed the most suitable for reaching a wider pool of respondents across different states in Malaysia, including **Sarawak and Sabah**. **Convenience sampling** and **purposive sampling** were utilized to recruit participants.

Demographic Respondent

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the research respondents. Total number of the respondents is 71. From the table below, majority of participants in this study were **female students (60.6%)**, with **married individuals comprising 50.7%** of the sample. Respondents from a **Muslim background made up the largest group (54.9%)**, and the most common age group was **18 to 29 years old (40.8%)**. In terms of nationality, **respondents from the Middle East constituted the largest proportion (45.1%)** compared to other regions. Regarding educational background, the majority of respondents **held a PhD degree (46.5%)**. Additionally, **UNISEL students made up the highest percentage (26.8%)**, and most respondents were studying in **Selangor (77.5%)**.

Table 1

Demographic for Quantitative Respondents

PROFILE	FREQUENCIES (N)	PERCENTAGE (%)
Gender		
Male	28	39.4
Female	43	60.6
Marital Status		
Single	35	49.3
Married	36	50.7
Religion		
Muslim	39	54.9
Buddha	6	8.5
Hindu	1	1.4
Christian	7	9.9
Others	18	25.4

Age		
18 – 29	29	40.8
30 – 39	23	32.4
40 – 49	14	19.7
50 – 59	4	5.6
Above 60	1	1.4
Country of Origin		
China	21	29.6
Indonesia	13	18.3
Singapore	3	4.2
Thailand	2	2.8
Middle East	32	45.1
Level of Education		
Diploma	2	2.8
Bachelor degree	17	23.9
Master degree	19	26.8
PhD	33	46.5
University		
UNISEL	19	26.8
UPM	4	5.6
UKM	18	25.4
UTM	6	8.5
UITM	3	4.2
USIM	3	4.2
UNIMAS	2	2.8
UNITEN	3	4.2
UCMI	3	4.2
Uni. Al-Bukhari	2	2.8
MSU	2	2.8
Others	6	8.5
State of University		
Kedah	3	4.2
Selangor	55	77.5
Negeri Sembilan	3	4.2
Johor	3	4.2
Kelantan	1	1.4
Sarawak	3	4.2
Kuala Lumpur	3	4.2

Data Analysis and Research Findings

Research Objective 1: To examine the different phases of cross-cultural adaptation experienced by international students in Malaysia

Table 2 presents the cultural adaptation phase among international students in Malaysia. The overall mean of the honeymoon phase, 3.85 (SD=0.79) suggests a general tendency towards adjusting themselves to the new culture. This honeymoon phase explained that the respondents were still new and just arrived in Malaysia. At this phase, the time duration is between one

month and three months. From the results, the most significant statement of the honeymoon phase is “the people are very friendly” ($M=4.18$, $SD=1.11$), showing that respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. This is closely followed by “I love learning about Malaysian culture” ($M=4.13$, $SD=0.86$) and “Malaysians welcome me well” ($M=4.10$, $SD=0.97$). From the statement above, explain that most of the international students feel welcome and comfortable when they arrive in Malaysia at the beginning. They feel that all Malaysians are friendly and easy to make friends with local people and students. They are also willing to learn more about Malaysian culture since they will stay in Malaysia for several years. However, the statement with the least agreement was “I find the Malaysian language easy to learn and understand” ($M=3.20$, $SD=1.26$), suggesting that local language is the most challenging factor for the respondents. During this time, these students have been staying in Malaysia between three months to six months. They are in the phase of learning Malaysian culture and trying to socialize with the local community.

However, the overall mean of the cultural shock phase is 2.60 ($SD=0.88$), representing the respondents having some problems and challenges when they are in Malaysia. The statement of “I have trouble understanding the Malaysian accent” ($M=3.01$, $SD=1.28$), “I have trouble learning the Malay language” ($M=2.86$, $SD=1.35$), “it is hard for me to assimilate to Malaysian culture” ($M=2.76$, $SD=1.16$) represents that respondents have difficulties on learning Malay language and understand the Malaysian accent. Obviously, at this stage, all respondents started learning Malaysian culture and language. Even though the majority of the international students are from China, the accent of the Chinese language is different from the Malaysian Chinese accent. Generally, in mainland China, most of them use Hokkien or Cantonese accents while in Malaysia they use Mandarin. On top of that, although they can be considered the same race Chinese (local and international) the culture is different. As claimed by the Chinese mainland students, local Chinese in Malaysia culture is not the same as them in terms of apparel, food, and the way they communicate. Apparel for instance, the local Chinese students are simpler and more casual, while the China mainland students prefer formal casual style. As for food, local Chinese students are familiar with a bit of spicy food but not for them. On the other hand, all international students need to learn the Malay language regardless of which country, and the course is compulsory for all international students to pass. They are not familiar with the language and according to them, they still don’t have many local students who can guide them in Malay language.

The overall mean of adjustment phase is 3.93 ($SD=0.55$). At this phase, the number of international students staying in Malaysia is almost six months to one year. Basically, they are adjusting to accept the Malaysian culture and practices, including the education system, lifestyle, food, climate, cultural norms and leadership in the host country. It means that the respondents can accept the difference of Malaysian culture between cultures of the country origin. Its proven by the statement of “I try to understand and respect Malaysian cultural practice” ($M=4.32$, $SD=0.84$) and “I am adapting to the Malaysian style of education” ($M=4.11$, $SD=0.83$), showing that respondents either agreed and strongly agreed with this statement. Chinese students from the mainland try to respect and accept the differences in terms of the culture of local Chinese students. The survey also shows that international students try to make friends with local students, regardless of which country they come from. Some of them started to have a group of local students such as Indonesian students, they claimed that they had a group of local Malay students who pursued PhD at the same university. The same goes

for Bangladesh students who also have a group of local students among their classmates. Even though the education system in Malaysia is different from the international student's home country, the respondents still trying to accept and adjust themselves with the education system in Malaysia.

For the last adaptation phase, overall mean 3.60 (SD=0.81). At this time, the international students had stayed in Malaysia for more than one year. They are already adjusting and adapting to Malaysian culture and practices. From the research finding, the majority of respondents agreed and strongly agreed with the statement "I love staying in Malaysia" (M=4.01, SD=1.04), "I have learned to adapt to the Malaysian etiquette" M=3.96, SD=1.03) and "I am used to the Malaysian weather" (M=3.96, SD=1.03). The feedback from the respondents proved that they loved to stay in Malaysia. It shows that most of them already feel comfortable with Malaysian culture and can adapt fully to Malaysian etiquette and practices. On the other hand, some of the respondents come from a country that has cold weather. Malaysia is synonymous with tropical weather which is wet and dry. The finding from the survey shows that these students have already adapted to the wet and dry weather in Malaysia.

Table 2

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Phase

Particular	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
<i>Cultural Adaptation: Honeymoon Phase</i>	3.85	0.79
1. Malaysians welcome me well	4.10	0.97
2. I love being in Malaysia	4.04	1.02
3. I enjoy staying in Malaysia	4.06	1.02
4. I enjoy eating Malaysian food and dishes	3.59	1.23
5. I find the Malaysian language easy to learn and understand	3.20	1.26
6. I love learning about Malaysian culture	4.13	0.86
7. It is easy for me to associate with the locals	3.68	1.20
8. I find Malaysia's history interesting	3.90	0.97
9. I find Malaysian weather acceptable	3.65	1.18
10. The people are very friendly	4.18	1.11
<i>Cultural Adaptation: Culture Shock Phase</i>	2.60	0.88
1. It is hard for me to assimilate to the Malaysian culture	2.76	1.16
2. It is hard for me to mix with the locals	2.69	1.17
3. I find the Malaysian weather to be unbearable	2.45	1.18
4. I find it difficult to stay in Malaysia	2.14	1.22
5. I do not find Malaysian foods to be delicious	2.39	1.17
6. Education in Malaysia is difficult for me	2.44	1.20
7. The locals do not socialize with me	2.30	1.21
8. I have trouble learning the Malay language	2.86	1.35
9. I find the prices of foods to be expensive in Malaysia	2.55	1.21
10. I have trouble understanding the Malaysian accent	3.01	1.28

<i>Cultural Adaptation: Adjustment Phase</i>	3.93	0.55
1. I am adjusting myself to the Malaysian life	3.82	0.94
2. I try to get used to Malaysian foods and dishes	3.99	0.88
3. I am getting accustomed to the Malaysian prices and currency	4.03	0.79
4. I am starting to get used to the Malaysian weather	4.04	0.91
5. I am trying to learn the Malaysian language	3.90	0.98
6. I attempt to build relationships with the locals	4.04	0.91
7. I am adapting to the Malaysian style of education	4.11	0.83
8. I try to understand and respect Malaysian cultural practices	4.32	0.84
9. I put effort into exploring new places in Malaysia	4.03	1.01
10. The language barrier is difficult for me	3.04	1.36
<i>Cultural Adaptation: Adaptation Phase</i>	3.60	0.81
1. I am comfortable with eating Malaysian foods and dishes	3.59	1.26
2. I am familiar with the Malaysian economy and prices	3.75	1.02
3. I have many Malaysian friends	3.24	1.36
4. I hope to be a Malaysian permanent resident someday	3.23	1.37
5. I love staying in Malaysia	4.01	1.04
6. I have learned to adapt to the Malaysian etiquette	3.96	1.03
7. I am familiar with the Malaysian language	3.25	1.28
8. I am used to the Malaysian weather	3.96	1.03
9. I have explored many places in Malaysia	3.51	1.14
10. I have built relationships with Malaysians	3.52	1.16

Discussion and Conclusion

International students in Malaysia undergo a multifaceted process of cultural adaptation, typically progressing through four distinct phases: honeymoon, culture shock, adjustment, and adaptation phases. For the honeymoon phase, the international students often experience excitement and fascination with Malaysia's diverse culture, cuisine, and hospitality upon arrival. This initial period is marked by enthusiasm and curiosity as they explore their new environment. However, this study found that in the culture shock phase the international students may encounter challenges such as language barriers, academic pressures, and homesickness. These difficulties can lead to feelings of frustration and anxiety, impacting their academic performance and social interactions. Studies have identified language proficiency and academic adaptation as significant factors influencing sociocultural adjustments.

Next, the international students also experienced with adjustment phase. The international students begin to develop coping strategies, such as forming friendships, improving language skills, and understanding local customs. This phase involves a gradual adaptation to the new environment, leading to increased comfort and confidence. In the final stage, students feel fully adapted into Malaysian society, effectively navigating cultural differences and often developing a bicultural identity. They participate actively in both academic and social spheres, contributing to and benefiting from the multicultural environment. However, this study focused generally on international students in Malaysia.

Future research could explore comparative perspectives across different nationalities of international students in Malaysia.

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