

# AN EARLY STUDY ON PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ADJUSTMENT AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: THE CASE OF A HIGHER LEARNING INSTITUTION IN MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

The globalization of the economy and society has had its impact on Malaysian higher education institutions, particularly universities. The Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education aims at intensifying globalization through increasing the number of international students. However, many international students struggle with adjusting to a new culture. The role of social support on international students' adjustment is important because international students encounter many academic and cultural challenges when they come to Malaysia. Thus, the present study examined the relationship between perceived social support and psychological adjustment of international students in a Malaysian public university. A total of 185 international students from various countries and regions completed questionnaires about their perceived social support and psychological adjustment. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support was used to assess international students' social support. Psychological adjustment was measured with the Satisfaction With Life Scale. As hypothesized, the two dimensions of perceived social support significantly related with psychological adjustment. Implications of the findings for better adjustment in university environment among international students and future research on international students; adjustment are discussed.

**Keywords:** perceived social support, psychological adjustment, international students, Malaysia.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Today with the ease of travelling and the globalization of business, countless opportunities for cross-cultural contacts have been created. Advances in technology and trade have created a global marketplace. An evolving aspect of this globalization is international education. In the context of today's internationalization in higher education, the students' composition is

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increasingly international, with many more students furthering their studies away from their home countries. According to Tochkov et al. (2010), currently, of the million plus international students studying worldwide, half of them are studying in the United States. In Malaysia, international student enrolment is an important goal to the country's higher education, the economy, and to the nation's society in general. Ye (2006) defined "international students as a group in transition who live in a foreign country to pursue their educational goals" (p. 866).

Since 2001, a flurry of newspaper and magazine articles has been published about the decrease in the enrollment of international students in the United States since the events of September 11, 2001 (Alberts, 2007). Morshidi (2008) highlighted that they were reluctant to go to the U.S. for their education. The U.S. government-mandated changes in the admissions process themselves have contributed to the decrease in new enrollment. After 9/11, the growth in numbers of international students enrolled in Malaysian higher learning institutions has been marked, increasing from 3,167 in 2003 to 12,411 in 2008 (see Table 1 below). These students are drawn from a wide range of countries throughout the world. As shown in Table 1, out of the figures provided by National Higher Education Research Institute's Report (2009), students from Indonesia and Iran constitute the highest number of international students in public universities in this country. They number 3,631 and 3,100 respectively. There are also a big number of students from China (1,583), Yaman (1,374), Libya (727), and Arab Saudi (612). The arrival of these students on university and college campuses diversifies the viewpoints of the student body, enhances cultural exchange, and promotes internationalization of higher education in Malaysia (Ambigapathy, 2008; Morshidi, 2008), and greatly contributes to academia, for instance, making visible the need for cross-cultural psychological studies.

**Table 1:** The Malaysia's source countries of international students, 2003-2008

State	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	Total
Indonesia	1496	1721	1504	1850	3000	3631	13202
Iran				736	2049	3100	5885
China	119	175	282	373	1160	1583	3692
Yaman	219	308	371	457	837	1374	3566
Thailand	475	360	493	464	719		2511
Bangladesh	152	175	187	230	309	386	1439
Sudan	284	0	237	278		554	1353
India	139	171	211	209	257		987
Nigeria				117	258	442	817
Libya						727	727
Pakistan	74	129	130	137	164		634
Arab Saudi						612	612
Singapura	172	198					370
Maldiv	37	55	108				200
Korea Selatan	0	16	0				16
Bostawa					1	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>3167</b>	<b>3308</b>	<b>3523</b>	<b>4851</b>	<b>8754</b>	<b>12411</b>	<b>36014</b>

*Source:* National Higher Education Research Institute, Ministry of Higher Education (June, 2009)

Given this large number of international students, greater attention has been directed toward the adjustment of students from abroad to Malaysia (Ambigapathy, 2008; Moshidi, 2008; Yusliza, 2010; Yusliza and Shankar, 2010). Although the number of international students on campuses continues to increase, only a limited number of recently published studies have examined this topic in Malaysia. For instance, research by National Higher Education Research Institute from the Ministry of Higher Education in June 2009, research has concentrated on issues and problems in attracting international students coming to Malaysia, issues and problems in the socialization of the international students, how to deal with the issues and problems faced by the international students, and finally suggestions to manage and recruit the international students. Morshidi (2008) has made an attempt to study the impact of September 11 on international student flow into Malaysia. The field of international students' adjustment has done tremendous work examining various factors, antecedents, determinants, and outcomes and has led the way in the area of multiculturalism on university campuses. However, a stronger focus on international students is still needed in international students' adjustment literature particularly in Malaysia.

Moving from one academic environment to another and relocating to a new country to study is becoming an increasingly common occurrence (Brisset et al., 2010). International students who decide to pursue studies in a foreign country have to overcome the challenges that are related to their adjustment experiences. They are required to deal with the differences between their own cultural values, norms and customs and those of their hosts (Ang and Liamputtong, 2008).

According to Misra et al. (2003), all international students go through the process of adjusting to a new educational system and social environment. Adjustment to these new environments can be a stressful process (Li and Gasser, 2005; Sumer et al., 2008) for international students who have the added strain of adjusting to new cultural values, language, and study habits. McLachlan and Justice (2009) found that majority of the international students reported academic, cultural, social differences, and serious health problems at the university in the U.S. Yan and Berliner (2009) found that international students faced with the academic stress, facing the strain of language and academic problems, challenges with interaction with the faculty members, and culture differences.

It has become increasingly important to gain a greater understanding of the mechanisms that underlie the relationship between psychological adjustment and perceived social support. It would help psychologists, counselors, academicians, and the staff of international offices and student support services to assist international students who experience problems and to better prepare students who will be going abroad.

This paper is part of a larger research project in which several aspects of international students' adjustment were investigated. In the present paper, we aim to examine the relationship between social support and psychological adjustment of the international students from one public university in Malaysia.

## 2. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The major purpose of this study was to understand the relationship between social support and psychological adjustment.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 3.1. *Psychological Adjustment*

One of the primary theoretical processes related to adjustment is the reduction of uncertainty (Black, 1988). Adjustment is a subjective/psychological state and it refers to changes which individuals actively engender or passively accept in order to achieve or maintain satisfactory states within themselves (Torbiorn, 1982). The topic of “adjustment” has been researched quite extensively through the lens of many fields of study – education, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and counselling. Subsequently, there is a vast body of literature on this phenomenon. “Acculturation” “adjustment” and “assimilation” have been used interchangeably (Kagan and Cohen, 1990). Some cross-cultural psychologists have tried to differentiate the terms even though no general agreement exists (Ward, 1996). Adjustment involves attitudinal and emotional adjustments of foreigners to the host culture and socially integrating an individual into the social interaction of the new culture (Thomas and Althen, 1989).

Cross-cultural adjustment, in turn, has been conceptualized as the degree of psychological adjustment experienced by the individual or the degree of comfort, familiarity, and ease that the individual feels toward the new environment (Church, 1982; Mendenhall and Oddou, 1985). According to Searle and Ward (1990), psychological adjustment is customarily considered to be general feelings of well-being and satisfaction the expatriate comes to experience because of reduction of the stress of living in the new culture. It is broadly affected by personality, life changes, coping styles, and social support (Ward and Kennedy, 1999).

The psychological adjustment of international students has remained an area of intense scholarly interest for many years. To name only a few, Pan et al. (2008) analyzed data from 606 Chinese students studying abroad at the University of Melbourne in Australia and at 6 universities in Hong Kong using hierarchical regression analysis and path analysis. They examined the relationship between acculturative stressors, meaning of life, psychological adjustment (satisfaction with life), and demographic information. They found that psychological adjustment did not differ significantly between the 2 samples. Meaning of life had a strong positive contribution and acculturative stressors had a negative contribution in predicting psychological adjustment in both samples. Meaning of life partially mediated the relationship between acculturative stressors and psychological adjustment in both samples.

Wilton and Constantine (2003) examined length of residence, cultural adjustment difficulties, and psychological distress symptoms in 190 Asian and Latin American international college students. Findings of their study revealed that Latin American students reported higher levels of psychological distress than Asian peers. Moreover, length of residence in the U.S. was negatively associated with psychological distress symptoms, and acculturative distress and intercultural competence concerns were positively related to psychological distress in both groups.

### **3.2. Social Support**

One factor that appears to improve adjustment is social support, which may provide international students with opportunities to develop an understanding of the new culture. Copeland and Norell (2002) stated that the role of social support on international relocations is accentuated because an overseas assignment presents both the disruption of established social support networks and the challenge to develop new one. Besides, social support is considered within the stress and coping framework and has been found to be an important predictor in psychological adaptation during cross-cultural transitions (e.g., Brisset et al., 2010; O'Reilly et al., 2010; Safdar et al., 2003; Safdar et al., 2009; Sumer et al., 2008; Ward and Rana-Deuba, 2000).

Brisset et al. (2010) examined the relationship between trait-anxiety, adult attachment, psychological distress, social support, cultural identification, and sociocultural adaptation among 112 Vietnamese international students in France and 101 French students, undergoing a first transition in French university. The relationship between satisfaction with social support and psychological distress was supported among the Vietnamese students in relation to both forms of social support (the more distressed, the less satisfied they were with their social support), but not among the French students.

A study by O'Reilly et al. (2010), utilized the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support to examine social support from family, friends, and significant other, and their relationships to different variables such as loneliness, stress, psychological well-being, and sociocultural adaptation of international students. The study found that, although international students had high levels of social support and low levels of loneliness and stress, students were experiencing high levels of sociocultural adjustment difficulties and psychological distress.

Another study by Sumer et al. (2008) examined gender, age, race/ethnicity, social support, English proficiency, and length of stay, and their relationships to depression and anxiety among international students. Subject included 440 international students (57% men and 43% women) with the average age of 26.15 years. They found that students with lower levels of social support reported higher levels of depression and anxiety.

In the current study, social support from different sources was investigated. The sources include family, friends, and availability of special person (Zimet et al., 1988). Basol (2008) carried out a study on validity and reliability of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support with a Turkish sample. He conducted an exploratory factor in order to examine the factor structure underlying the data and a confirmatory factor analysis to confirm the three-factor structure of the scale. His study found that the internal consistency of the total and subscale scores were satisfactory (Cronbach's alpha = .93) confirming three dimensions and satisfactory reliability. Similar items have been used to assess social support in recent research (e.g. Velotti, 2008).

### **3.3. Social Support and Adjustment**

Many scholars have investigated the impact of social support on adjustment (Hwang et al., 2011; Brisset et al., 2010; Chirkov et al., 2008; Friedlander et al., 2007; Ward et al., 2006; Lidy

& Kahn, 2006). For instance, Hwang et al. (2011) employed a structural equation model to the interrelationships between all variables in the entire model. They found that social support has a positive significant influence on adjustment.

Increased social support from friends predicted an improved adjustment to college in a sample of 115 first-year undergraduate students at a mid-size Canadian university comparing their first semester with 10 weeks later (Friedlander et al., 2007). Research on the meditational role of perceived social support revealed that perceived social support mediated the relationships between personality factors (emotional stability, social boldness, and abstractness) and adjustment to college in a sample of 111 freshmen during first semester of college (Lidy & Kahn, 2006).

However, there have been no studies in which the scope of the research has included an examination of social support (Zimet et al., 1988) in relation to psychological adjustment (Diener et al., 1985). In addition, none of the literature specifically focused on this relationship among the international students in Malaysia. With this research, we aimed to fill this gap in the literature.

### **3.4. The Present Study's Hypotheses**

The aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between social support and psychological adjustment of international students in Malaysia. Specifically the following hypotheses were formulated:

**Hypothesis 1:** Social support is related to psychological adjustment. Specifically, it was hypothesized that those who report a higher level of support from family (1a), higher level of support from friends (1b), and high on availability of special person (1c) are more likely to report higher level of psychological adjustment.

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a cross-sectional survey methodology in order to investigate the relationships between social support, represented by support from family, support from friends, and availability of special person and psychological adjustment. The target study participants are international students currently studying in one of the Malaysian public universities. The researchers developed a survey consisting of previously published subscales. The method used to the hypotheses is multiple regression analysis. The dependent variable is psychological adjustment. The independent variable is social support.

### **4.1. The Sample**

The sample population consisted of international students from various countries studying in a Malaysian public university. The list of participants was obtained from the International Office of that university. This is the most reliable and comprehensive list of international students studying in that university available to researchers. This is a sample of convenience. Questionnaires were personally given to the international students during class, cafes, and in the library.

#### **4.2. Sampling Procedures**

Surveys were distributed to potential participants studying in the second semester of academic year 2009/2010 in person. The data are confidential and the participants were informed of this in the cover letter. Anonymity is assured by identifying individual questionnaires only by numbers. A total of 200 surveys were completed and returned. Of these, 15 were removed from the data set because they were unusable because the survey was not fully completed. This left a total of 185 usable surveys for the study.

#### **4.3. The Research Instrument**

As previously stated, this study employs the use of a survey instrument and consists of several subscales previously validated and published. A section to elicit demographical information is included in the survey instrument.

##### **i. Independent Variable: Social Support**

The second part of the questionnaire is the 12-item Multidimensional scale of Perceived Social Support. The scale was designed to measure the perceived adequacy of social support from three sources: family, friends, and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). Response choices were in the form of a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

##### **ii. Dependent Variable: Psychological Adjustment Instrumentation**

The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener et al., 1985) is a 5-item measure of the psychological adjustment. Specifically, it assesses respondent's satisfaction with life as a whole according to his or her criteria. It uses a 5-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) on which respondents are asked to agree or disagree with five statements (e.g. "In most ways my life is close to my ideal").

## **5. RESULTS**

### **5.1. Demographics**

Participants were 185 international undergraduate students enrolled in a large public university in the Northern region of Malaysia. In all, 85 were male (45.9%) and 100 were female (54.1%). The students were from a variety of different countries (48.1% from China, 14.1% from Indonesia, 10.3% from Finland, 7.0% from Canada, 4.3% from Thailand, 3.2% from France, 2.7% from Saudi Arabia, 2.2% from Korea, and 8.1% from other countries such as Maldives, Nigeria, Singapore, Cambodia, Sudan, Iran, and the United States) and identified a variety of different languages as their native languages (Mandarin: 48.1%; Indonesian: 13.5%; English: 10.3%; Finnish: 9.7%; Thai: 3.8%; French and Arabic: 3.2% respectively; Korean: 2.2%). The average age was 21.2 years ( $SD = 1.53$ ) and their average length of stay in Malaysia was 16 months ( $SD = 12.64$ ). More than three fourths (98.4%) of the subjects were single and 1.6% of the subjects were married. All faculties were represented, with more than half of the students enrolled in the School of Management (56.2%).

## 5.2. Correlations

Table 2 provides the bivariate correlations between psychological adjustment, support from family, support from friends, and availability of special person. Psychological adjustment was significantly associated with higher levels of support from family ( $r = .43, p < .01$ ), higher levels of support from friends ( $r = .48, p < .01$ ), and higher levels of availability of special person ( $r = .59, p < .01$ ).

**Table 2:** Pearson Product-Moment Correlations of Psychological Adjustment, Support from Family, Support from Friends, and Availability of Special Person

Variable	1	2	3	4
1. Support from Family	1.00			
2. Support from Friends	.60**	1.00		
3. Availability of Special Person	.65**	.69**	1.00	
4. Psychological Adjustment	.43**	.48**	.59**	1.00

*Notes:* \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

## 5.3. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 3 provides means, standard deviations, and internal consistency estimates for psychological adjustment, support from family, support from friends, and availability of special person.

**Table 3:** Means, Standard Deviations, and Reliabilities for Psychological Adjustment, Support from Family, Support from Friends, and Availability of Special Person

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	$\alpha$
1. Support from Family	3.94	.93	.88
2. Support from Friends	3.87	1.01	.64
3. Availability of Special Person	3.67	.95	.87
4. Psychological Adjustment	3.49	.79	.85

## 5.4 Multiple Regression Analyses

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to test the hypotheses (H1a, H1b, and H1c) of this study. Specifically, these hypotheses are on the effects of the three dimensions of social support on psychological adjustment. Social support comprised of support from family, support from friends, and availability of special person. The dependent variable in this model relates to psychological adjustment. Three main independent variables were entered in the regression analysis. Table 4 shows the results of the regression analysis performed to test this hypothesis.



Overall, the regression model was statistically significant,  $R^2 = .41$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = .40$ ,  $F$  Change = 41.21,  $p = .00$ . Out of the three independent variables investigated, support from friends ( $\beta = .24$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and availability of special person ( $\beta = .46$ ,  $p < .00$ ) had significant positive effects on psychological adjustment. Thus, H1b and H1c are supported. However, H1a is rejected due to insignificant finding. Based on the *beta*-value, it can be said that availability of special person had the highest explanatory power as compared to support from friends.

**Table 4:** Regression Results between Social Support and Psychological Adjustment

Variable	Standard Beta
<b>Social Support</b>	
Support from Family	-.01
Support from Friends	.24***
Availability of Special Person	.46***
$R^2$	.41
Adjusted $R^2$	.40
$R^2$ Change	.41
F Change	41.21
Sig. F Change	.00
Durbin-Watson Index	1.84

*Notes:* \* $p < .10$ , \*\* $p < .05$ , \*\*\* $p < .01$

## 6. DISCUSSION

At the general level, we tested the importance of social support that in previous research were found to be predictor of psychological adjustment.

Results of this study showed that only two dimensions of social support (support from friends and availability of special person) significantly contributed to the level of psychological adjustment. These results suggest that the importance of friends in their study's environment and the existence of secret admire, special boyfriend/girlfriend, or the person they admire has helped the students to adjust better in psychological aspect of adjustment.

The benefits of having social relationships are crucial for the international students' adjustment, especially relationships with friends from Malaysia. Having Malaysian friends are essential when it comes to cultural and language adaptation. As Church (1982) stated, co-national friends are beneficial in providing the sense of belonging. In addition, international students lose their shared identity and support from their families as they pursue studies in Malaysia. This loss of support forces them to develop new cross-cultural friendships with individuals from the host nation as well as other international students.

The current study demonstrates that international students had relatively highest levels of support coming from special person as compared to support from friends. Students who

experiences higher levels of support from special person were more likely to experience more psychological adjustment in the university. Literature highlights the importance of perception of *support* - the perception of being loved by others and that they will be available if needed - in *adjustment* of the members of the couple (Pasch and Bradbury, 1998; Beach and Gupta, 2006).

The results of this study do not support the findings of previous studies regarding international students' support from family and their psychological adjustment (Black and Gregersen, 1991; De Cieri et al., 1991). Black and Gregersen (1991) and De Cieri et al. (1991) reported that satisfaction with family relationships has been shown to be significantly associated with psychological adjustment to relocation throughout the expatriation process. There might be two reasons for this discrepant finding. First, previous studies (Black and Gregersen, 1991; De Cieri et al., 1991) used samples that included expatriate in international assignment. Most of the expatriates are married, thus they need their spouse and children to be in the country's assignment to support their life and work in foreign country. For the current study, most of the international students are single and the most important person in university life is their friends and special person in order to give moral support in their study. Second, the students are reluctant to seek support from family from their home countries because they do not want their families to worry about them in Malaysia. As a result, they only rely on their friend or co-nationals for their social interaction and relationships needs.

## 7. IMPLICATIONS

As Hwang et al. (2011) noted, to advance their education abroad, the investment is huge for international students. The budget for education programs to host international students by the Ministry of Higher Education is, therefore, important in order to provide necessary social support to the international students on campus. The higher learning institutions in Malaysia not only need to increase the number of the international students, but they need to emphasize on the quality (i.e., high CGPA) of the students' academic performance. The ministry together with the higher learning institutions in Malaysia always supports multicultural education and allows international students to better adjust to the system and unfamiliar environment. Thus, helping them achieves high grades; this results in improved resources that allow the institution to compete in the global education market.

Malaysia as a fully developed country, living in a peaceful and harmony society, it is important for universities where international students are enrolled to focus on social support, especially support from friends and availability of special person. These supports were the most preferred source to get advice about psychological adjustment problems and difficulties. The students usually consulted their fellow international students regarding their personal problems, difficulties, and concerns because their fellow international students spoke the same language, shared the same culture, and had similar adjustment issues; therefore, they were the best people to provide support and advice.

The higher education system in Malaysia should implement an effective orientation program stressing the academic aspects of Malaysian university education. A well-organized academic

orientation can also help international students become aware of aspects of university life and then make better psychological adjustment which will lead to high academic performance. In planning orientation programs for international students, university personnel as part of the society should recognize that academic achievement is the highest priority for most international students. Therefore, discussing academic demands in Malaysia classrooms and strategies to cope with academic or psychological stress should be one of the major components of the orientation programs.

In summary, providing social support to assist international students in making a successful adjustment psychologically is an important issue that warrants further attention in Malaysian higher education. Not only is the social support crucial for the positive well being of international students, but social support also provides a powerful coping resources for persons experiencing stressful life changes (Lee et al., 2004; Sumer et al., 2008). Therefore, universities may ease international students' psychological adjustment issues through assistance in establishing these social support networks.

## 8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Although this study makes contributions to the subject of individual differences as they relate to psychological adjustment, certain limitations should be taken into consideration as is the case with any study. The first limitation is related to the sample of the study. The results of this research cannot be generalized due to the fact that the entire sample was taken from individuals from one location: the Northern region of Malaysia. A second limitation of the study is that, the results cannot be generalized because all of the international students in the sample are adjusting to one particular culture: Malaysia. A third limitation of the study is that no control variable was included to the hypotheses. Research has indicated that age, marital status, gender, length of stay, and English language proficiency are related with adjustment (Polek, et al., 2008; Poyrazli and Kavanaugh, 2006; Poyrazli et al., 2002; Sumer et al., 2008). A fourth limitation of the study is that although relationship was found between independent and dependent variables, a cross-sectional study is not able to assign cause-and-effect relationships between the variables. The last limitation of this study is its accuracy and reliability if the students did not totally understand the questionnaire. Many subjects provided feedback on difficulties in understanding the survey questionnaire. There might be inevitably different levels of English proficiency among the participants because majority of the respondents were from China. Therefore, some participants might not be able to respond correctly to the questionnaire because of their lack of English proficiency.

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