

## THE STUDY OF FIRST YEAR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' EXPATRIATE EXPERIENCES IN UNIVERSITY OF MALAYSIA SABAH

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**Abstract:** *Globalisation has a huge impact on the process of internationalisation of higher education to fulfil the country's aspiration as a hub of higher education excellence globally alongside the effort of the Ministry of Higher Education in promoting Malaysia as one of the chosen destinations among international students. This research is based on two objectives that are (i) to identify the first year expatriation experience of international students in University Malaysia Sabah and (ii) to investigate the tendency of international students in gaining meaningful experiences during the stay in the chosen country. The discussion of this paperwork is based on the interviews done with 20 volunteered respondents who are also involved in focal group discussions. The research result shows most of the respondents chose University Malaysia Sabah as it is deemed to be a smart choice in relation to its status as a global and competitive university. Meanwhile, as a comprehensive university, the intake of international students has indirectly given a positive impact especially in terms of the offered programs that fulfil the career prospects of international students. The results has also found that the background factor of University Malaysia Sabah that has a credible and experienced line of lecturers, either locals or academic expatriates, has strengthened the cause of decision to expatriate here and to gain meaningful experiences while studying overseas. Hopefully, the path of this exploration research can be beneficial as well as playing the role in giving a better illustration related to first year expatriation experiences of international students.*

**Keywords:** *First Year Expatriation Experience, International Students, University Malaysia Sabah, Principles and Policies of Internationalisation*

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## **Introduction**

The education system in Malaysia nowadays is more open especially for the intake of international students who are willing to further their studies in this country. Internationalization is seen as an approach that could increase as well as empower the higher education system so that it could be at par with higher education institutions that are at the level of international simultaneously contributing to the increase of international student intake around the globe (Croese, 2011).

In the effort to intensify internationalism, various efforts are being implemented such as relevant study offers to international students, collaboration in research as well as development in various education departments in higher education institutions and overseas in the effort to achieve international recognition (Kementerian Pengajian Tinggi, 2009). The Pull Factor in the exploration and cultural aspects are among the main attractions on why Malaysia is chosen as a study destination by international students. Exploration and culture are actually a process of expatriation that demands international students to get to know and embrace a culture of a region (Jandt, 2014).

As one of the developing countries, Malaysia is among the countries with an updated higher education system parallel with global education (Irene, 2013). This indirectly introduces Malaysia as a choice of education centre among international students. In the process of expatriation to explore as well as learn new cultures, adaptation is needed to make sure that international students could adapt themselves in the new surroundings, different cultures, languages, and ways of life and so on.

As a public university in Malaysia, University of Malaysia Sabah (UMS) is among the universities that are becoming the first choice for international students that would like to further their studies. This is because of the various programs offered as well as the uniqueness of local cultures that are being prevailed causing more international students to enroll themselves in UMS to further their studies. Because of that, this study is dismantling the expatriate experiences of the first year international students in UMS and studies on the tendency of international students in getting meaningful experiences with expatriating to their country of choice.

## **Literature Review**

Constantine (2014) found that the adaptation between cultures is a combination and understanding of attitudes or behaviors, values and cultural beliefs in a specific country. According to Kim (2013), the adaptation among cultures involves the process of adapting oneself in a new place where comfort would finally unveil itself and adapt one to the new surroundings. Sometimes, the adaptation process takes longer time to finally complete for an individual to be comfortable and to omit awkwardness due to the difference in values and cultures at a new place.

The findings of Sakurai (2010) show that the adaptation between cultures is a process that involves factors such as cognitive, behaviours, affective and demographic aspects as well as decision in different levels of adjustment from the cultural assimilation to cultural transmutation.

Challenges in globalizing education are also being faced by a number of international students that further their studies abroad. This includes cultural cross that involves international students

with the culture in the abroad countries. According to Colvin *et al.*, (2012), the lack of motivation in enhancing interaction between cultures is among the reasons why international students are lacking in the motivation to interact with the local students and society leading to the lack of openness attitude among international students and local students.

Upon furthering studies abroad, there are a few international students with difficulties especially in adapting themselves with the new surroundings because of the different cultural gaps with the local society. A study conducted by Zuriah *et al.*, (2010) has found that local students interact less with international students in group work. If there were a group task that involves group discussion, it is because of the instruction introduced by the lecturer, not because of their own will. Plus, English is a main aspect in interacting with international students with different cultures in a group discussion.

It is also supported by Mehdizadeh and Scoot (2010) where the meeting between two different cultures has developed a barrier especially from the aspects of culture and language as well as different studying methods and provisions to the studying methods due to the surroundings in a lecture hall that has numerous backgrounds and cultures.

According to Strauss (2013), there is a tendency among local students to use Malay language as the official language in a discussion. This causes the international students to feel neglected in contributing ideas. In implementing interaction between cultures, local students with low English command should try to improve in order to increase the command of the language and to avoid language gap between local students and international students.

## **Methodology**

The approach used in this study is the qualitative research approach via profound interview. As many as twenty respondents that are also volunteering international students to be interviewed willingly to contribute to this study. The set criteria in this study are; (i) first year pre graduate students from different backgrounds that are studying in University of Malaysia Sabah, (ii) students have to be in Malaysia for at least six months until a year, (iii) the status of education finance with sponsorship is managed by themselves or scholarship and (iv) the locations of this study is done in ten faculties in University of Malaysia Sabah. Interviews that have been implemented made use a set of questions that was drafted where it contains twelve questions that are projected to the respondents. The usage of the profound interview approach in qualitative research is very important because it is known as an effective way in getting legality as well as trustworthiness of data in the progressing study (Creswell, 2013).

## **Findings**

The results of the implemented interviews on twenty respondents unveiled three main aspects from the point of the UMS first year international students who are also expatriates . The three main aspects are; (i) New Experience, (ii) Higher Education Institution Culture, and (iii) Seeing Outer World. Meanwhile, in the tendency of international students to get meaningful experiences through expatriating to the country of choice prevailed three elements which are; (i) Culture Shock, (ii) New Expatriate Experience and (iii) Food Access.

### **1.1 The Aspects of New Experience, Higher Education Institute Culture and Observe the World as the First Year Expatriate International Students in UMS.**

**Table 1: The Aspects of New Experience, Higher Education Institution Culture (UMS) and Observe The World as The First Year Expatriate International Students in UMS**

<b>New Experience</b>	<b>Higher Education Institution Culture (UMS)</b>	<b>Seeing Outer World</b>
Respondent 1	Respondent 3	Respondent 5
Respondent 2	Respondent 7	Respondent 10
Respondent 4	Respondent 8	Respondent 11
Respondent 6	Respondent 14	Respondent 13
Respondent 9	Respondent 15	Respondent 19
Respondent 12	Respondent 17	
Respondent 16	Respondent 20	
Respondent 18		

***(i) New Experience***

Based on the findings of the study, it is found that as many as eight respondents from twenty respondents stated that furthering studies in UMS is a new experience for them. This is because not only they could study for their degree in UMS, but they could also explore and learn the cultures and the new experience in the country of choice. The findings of this study is parallel with a study conducted by Yang (2007) and Hasbullah *et al.*, (2017) where it is stated in the study that students choose to study abroad because the students want to experience new kind of experiences, education system and new cultures.

As an example, respondent 4 stated that the culture that was depicted by the local society here in Malaysia and UMS has given respondent 4 a new and meaningful experience in life. The unique cultures shown by local students in UMS can also be found in performances done in the university, facilitating respondent 4 in truly understanding and valuing the culture in a country. This can be seen from:

*“There is a lot of new experiences that i have gained from being in UMS. I feel as if the cultures that are shown to me here are very unique because i heard from my friends telling me that especially in Sabah, they have a lot of tribes that represent different cultures respectively. The unique cultures shown here made me interested with the cultures shown in any other places. What interests me a lot about the cultures here is the different cultural attire worn by different tribes respectively and it made me want to profoundly experience the cultures here. Clearly, this is a new meaningful experience for me”. (Respondent 4)*

For respondent 4, furthering studies abroad is seen as a new experience where uniqueness of cultures in the country makes respondent 4 want to profoundly experience as well as explore the new experience. In this context, the new experience that can be obtained from the chosen country is taken as an opportunity to appreciate cultures more in a country. New experiences in the destination country give exposition to international students to understand a culture in a region more (Chirkova, 2011).

***(ii). Higher Education Institution Culture***

From the aspect of higher education institution culture in UMS, Findings show seven respondents out of twenty respondents that stated their experience as first year expatriate international students is giving them exposition on the higher education institution culture (UMS). It is included in the context of culture and language shown by local students whether in or outside of university. The uniqueness of cultures as well as dialects spoken by the students

contributed to the collision of cultures among students. This makes it more unique according to the views of international students in UMS.

Respondent 11 said that the diversity of cultures and languages that we have in UMS made him feel excited to profoundly experience the local cultures and languages. Respondent 11 also stated that the diversity in dialects among local students that are being heard often made him wish to learn the local language. This is synonym with a study conducted by Chung *et al.*, (2014) and Hasbullah *et al.*, (2017) that stated, the mastery of local languages by international students is seen as not only able to give self confidence but it is also seen as an additional asset for international students. This can be seen from:

*"The most vivid view for me is the existence of the diversity of cultures, tribes and religions but everyone is still living in harmony. I have also found out a fact about Sabah from a faculty friend that says, for every tribe, there is a different language spoken in it respectively. At the bottom of my heart, I want to study and experience the unique local languages that we do not have in my country. Fortunately, I have a friend who is a Dusun and he is willing to teach me a bit of their local language (Dusun). I feel as if Dusun Language is a part of something that i can learn sooner or later". (Respondent 11)*

Through the statement by respondent 11, it is clear that respondent 11 is saying that the different cultures and languages that we have in our country could give a positive impact and it could benefit the international students to profoundly experience cultures and learn about the bees and the birds of the local languages. The university also shows concern on the efforts of intensifying local languages with providing related language classes especially for international students (Chung, 2009).

### ***(iii) Seeing Outer World***

Five out of twenty respondents of this study stated that their motive in furthering their studies abroad is to see the outer world or other places apart from their own countries. The result from an interview implemented on respondent 13 shows that respondent 13 uses the opportunity as an international student to see other places and uses the opportunity to the fullest to explore and visit interesting places in the destination country.

Respondent 13 stated that the opportunity to further studies abroad enables respondent 13 to visit interesting places with friends from the same country of origin during semester breaks. The finding of this study has a similarity with a study conducted by Colvin *et al.*, (2012), where expatriate international students not only see the opportunity to study abroad to develop their careers, but also an opening for them to explore new surroundings.

*"In my opinion, furthering my studies abroad gives me a new exposition where I can see the world and also explore new places. Through this initiative, I can visit and explore the country of choice's places that I have never stepped a foot on. I really enjoy studying in Malaysia especially in Sabah because it is rich with the value of history and it has great places to visit". (Respondent 13)*

With the explanation done by respondent 13, it is clear that the aspect of seeing the outside world and explore new places can give a very meaningful experience with exploring and

visiting historical places in the chosen country. According to Bodycott (2009), the decision to further studies abroad is because of the drive to see and explore new places.

### 1.2 The Elements of Culture Shock, New Expatriation Experience and Food Access as The Factors of International Students' Tendency In Obtaining Meaningful Experience Through Expatriating To The Chosen Destination Country

Table 2 below depicts the tendency of international students in getting meaningful experience through expatriating to the chosen country through the elements of (i) culture shock, (ii) new expatriation experience and (iii) food access.

**Table 2: The Elements of of Culture Shock, New Expatriation Experience and Food Access as The Factors of International Students' Tendency In Obtaining Meaningful Experience Through Expatriating To The Chosen Destination Country**

<b>Culture Shock</b>	<b>New Expatriate Experience</b>	<b>Food Access</b>
Respondent 1	Respondent 3	Respondent 4
Respondent 2	Respondent 6	Respondent 7
Respondent 5	Respondent 8	Respondent 13
Respondent 10	Respondent 9	Respondent 14
Respondent 12	Respondent 11	Respondent 17
Respondent 16	Respondent 15	Respondent 20
Respondent 18	Respondent 19	

#### ***(iv) Culture Shock***

Seven respondents stated that they experienced culture shock once they arrived in UMS. As an instance, respondent 5 stated that it is undoable to accept the new culture that is entirely different from the culture possessed by respondent 5's country of origin. This is because of the confusion that existed in facing the new surroundings. This is parallel with a study by Kim (2015) culture shock is caused by confusion in facing new cultures where the culture shock would usually causes depression and anxiety as well as fear of losing their own identities. This can be seen from:

*"I can still remember the first day I arrived in UMS, accompanied by my parents and my brother. They were with me from the start of my registration until my room where I had to reside in. After they left me there, my emotions gone unstable and suddenly, I felt afraid to the point that I was crying in my room. From my observation, the culture in the place that I have to stay in is very very different". (Respondent 5)*

Culture Shock is seen as an aspect that could cause international students to feel neglected because of the differences in cultures of the destination country. Through the statement of respondent 5, it is proved that culture shock also influences behaviors as well as characters of international students. According to Berry (2010), culture shock happens when international students feel awkward to accept new cultures because of the differences compared to their own cultures.

#### ***(vi) New Expatriate Experience***

As a comprehensive university, the arrival of international students gives ability in expatriation as well as exploration new experience. New expatriate experience enables international students to learn new cultures and steep into the cultural attitudes of the local society. The finding of this study is similar with a study done by Constantine (2014) that explained international adaptation

needs an individual to steep and learn new cultures in order to combine the norms and life values with the local cultures.

There are seven respondents whom stated that furthering studies in UMS as a new expatriate experience in learning and profoundly observe the local cultures. Respondent 10 stated the excitement of the expatriation to Malaysia in UMS and it is seen as a step to self-enhance from the aspect of academic and at the same time, respondent 10 could personally see the diversity in cultures, ethnicities, languages as well as the local traditions. Indirectly, respondent 10 has the opinion that furthering studies in UMS is really worth it. This can be observed from:

*"I am very excited when I am in UMS because here, I learn a lot of things. Among the best things that I like are the diversity in cultures, ethnicities, languages as well as traditions shown by the local students and the society and that makes me fall in love more with this state. I have never seen culture diversity as I see in this country. I have never seen culture diversity like this in my country. I am also opinionated that it is very worth it furthering my studies in UMS because it also enhances my academic performances". (Respondent 10)*

Result from the explanation of respondent 10 shows that expatriation has brought international students to gain new experiences and taught them to be more independent in the destination country without any help from family members. Through the new expatriate experience, international students can also expand their social network among international students and local citizens specifically. An active social network is able to increase communication among cultures (Petruzzellis, L., and Romanazzi, S., 2010).

#### **(vii) Food Access**

Food access is also a challenge that has to be faced by some International students. A finding by Nasir (2011) stated that cultural amendment especially from the aspect of food is also a consideration taken by international students before making any decisions to further their studies abroad. This is because of the fear that food might affect the students' health if the food in the destination country is not compatible with International students' appetites.

Six respondents stated that they have no problem to get the desired food access in the destination country. As an example, respondent 17 stated that since the first day a foot was stepped in UMS, respondent 17 had no problem with food. Because of the majority of Muslim students and food vendors staying in UMS, getting halal food is not a problem at all. In addition, respondent 17 has the opinion that the food here in UMS is way cheaper compared to respondent's 17 country of origin. This can be seen from:

*"I have no problem with food in UMS because there are a lot of Muslim students and food vendors. Because of that, getting halal food is extremely easy. Here, my favorite is Nasi Briyani Kambing. Wow! It tastes amazingly good. The most interesting thing is, the price of food here is way cheaper compared to my place". (Respondent 17)*

The ease in getting food access is vital specifically to Muslim international students. Malaysia is an active country in intensifying effort introducing halal food across the globe (Mansor, 2010).

## **Conclusion**

A conclusion from the findings of this study clearly shows that the aspects of new experience, higher education institution culture (UMS) and seeing the outside world are seen as important aspects for the first year expatriate international students in UMS. Exploring new experiences as an international student surely gives a big impact in facing adaptation around new surroundings for as long as the studies in the institution. Furthering studies abroad is viewed as a new experience where the uniqueness of cultures in the destination country makes the students want to explore the new experience more. In this context, new experiences that are being obtained in the destination country are taken as an opportunity to appreciate cultures in a country more. New experience in the destination country gives expositions to international students to understand more about cultures in a certain region (Chirkova, 2011).

It directly gives exposition to international students in the effort to learn the diversity of cultures and languages of the destination country simultaneously appreciating the uniqueness of the destination country. From the aspect of higher education culture itself, it shows the culture diversity shown by the local students that could attract the interest of international students to experience the cultures and local languages themselves. It directly gives exposition to international students in the effort to learn the diversity of cultures and languages of the destination country simultaneously appreciating the uniqueness of the destination country. The university also shows concern on the effort in intensifying local languages with providing language classes especially for international students (Chung 2009).

On the other hand, seeing the outside world shows the attitude of wanting to know on how to explore the outside world and at the same time further studies abroad. The aspect to look at and explore new places could give a very meaningful experience through strolling and explore historical places at the destination country. According to Bodycott (2009), the decision to further studies abroad is because of the encouragement to see the outside world and explore new places.

Elements such as culture shock, food access and new expatriate experience help international students in adapting themselves in the new surroundings that could lead to the adjustment of their daily lives. Culture shock is caused by confusion in facing new cultures where culture shock would usually cause depression and anxiety as well as the fear of losing their identities (Kim, 2013). Culture shock could also cause international students to feel neglected because of the difference in cultures. In this context, international students should be more open for changes so that they could accept new cultures to be benefitted for their life and studies in the destination country.

New expatriate experience enables international students to learn new cultures and profoundly steep into the local society's cultural traditions. This is also supported by Constantine (2014) whom stated that international adaptation needs an individual to steep into as well as learn new cultures in order to combine the norms and life values with the local societies. Through new expatriation experience, international students could increase their social network between international students and local students in specific.

Food access in the destination country is not only seen as an attraction to the arrival of international students but also deemed as an excuse in the factor of choosing study destinations. This is why food access in the destination country should be kept an eye on in order for it to always be at the best level.

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