

Studying away from home: Challenges encountered, and nature of support needed by female international students at University Technology MARA (UiTM)

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to seek the challenges that female international students who are studying at University Technology MARA (UiTM) encountered and the nature of support they need to deal with these challenges. Therefore, through this case study, four female international students who are studying different field of study at UiTM were interviewed to gain and collect the accurate data. The major findings of this study suggest that UiTM female international students have social environmental challenge, facility challenge, emotional challenge, financial challenge and academic related challenges and they need some sort of support to overcome the abovementioned challenges.

Keywords: female international students, challenges and nature of support

1. Introduction

Last year, the enrolment of international students at higher education institutes (HEIs) in Malaysia has increased by 12 percent (Fazleena, 2016). This shows that Malaysia is a country that provides the best education which causes Malaysia to be among popular education destinations for the international student (United Nations Educational Scientific & Cultural Organization (UNESCO), n.d). With cultural and geographical differences, of course, the international students will have problems and need support while they are studying in Malaysia. Based on UiTM International Student Postgraduate Program Study Guide (2014), University Technology Mara (UiTM) is Malaysia's largest public university and was located all over Malaysia. It is the higher education institution that has 13 branch campuses and 35 satellite campuses throughout Malaysia. When studying abroad there are certainly many challenges that international students need to go through. As stated by Malaklolunthu and Selan (2011), based on the rising interest of foreign students towards Malaysia, the Malaysian education sector both private and public must pay attention to the adjustment and transition issues of international students.

Studies have shown that international students experience challenges adjusting to food, weather, financial arrangement, health care, accommodation and the local language, while financial and language limitations add to the difficulties for the new students (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). According to Alavi & Mansor (2011), challenges included problems related to facilities, social environment, education system, financial problem and international office programs. Baroni (2011) stated that the challenges come in many forms- cultural, Languages, values and many others, and these can be different from those of their own countries (culture differences, language as second or foreign and etc). Academic difficulty categories among international students refer to the academic system, lecturers and methodology of teaching (Al-Zubaidi & Rechards, 2009). Other challenges found by Talebloo & Basri (2015) is the facility which stated that some students have complained that the buses do not run on time. Based on Hus (2003) finding, International student are experiencing homesickness due to being far away from family which is another challenge for them. According to Yee and Mokhtar (2013), having a large number of international students in the campus is excellent ,yet at the same time creates additional responsibilities and expectation onto the institutions. The university may have a system but it cannot be applied to both local and international students (Hooley & Horspool, 2006). The issues of greatest concern to international students are the challenges of higher education and getting used to new ways of learning and thinking, as international students come from different countries and backgrounds (Directgov, 2011). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify challenges and nature support among international postgraduate students in UiTM through addressing the following research questions.

1. What are the challenges that UiTM female international student face?
2. What is the nature of support that helps the female international students to overcome the challenges?

2. Research Methodology

The design of the study is a case study which is one type of qualitative research and is commonly used in social science as Starman (2013) argued. A Case study is used by a researcher to focus on an issue, event or a problem deeply. In this study the method of data collection was interview. So, a semi-structured interview was conducted to obtain data. A questionnaire which was adapted from Evivie (2009) on “challenges faced by African international students at a metropolitan research university: A phenomenological case study” used to gather data from four female international students who are currently studying at UiTM. The questionnaire was consisting of 14 questions. After each participant was interviewed, the interviews were taped and all of four interviews were transcribed in Microsoft word program based on what the participants stated. These international students were from four different countries namely, Afghanistan, Germany, Indonesia and Japan and from diverse fields of study, chemical engineering, civil engineering, applied science and tourism at UiTM for short term exchange program and post graduate degree. The sampling method which is used in this case study is convenience sampling. This means that researchers only include the ones who were easy to reach. The number of samples is selected to be less because the researchers wanted to understand the case deeply. The interviewees were met some days prior to the interview to have their consent and permission and for the convenience of participants, all face to face interview were done in their residential house.

2.1 Data analysis

After selecting and informing each participant of this study, the interview was conducted to collect data from them. For this case study, first the interview was transcribed and then the transcriptions of interview were approved by each participant of study. After that, based on research objectives and research questions the data divided into different challenges categories plus nature of support. Mainly, the participants of this study faced five challenges while staying away from home and studying at UiTM in Malaysia and suggest various ways of support as well.

3. Finding and discussion

Finding of this study is divided into two parts based on two research questions. The first part is on challenges that international students encountered and the second part focuses on nature of support. Five major challenges were mentioned by these female international students who are currently studying at UiTM.

3.1. Social environment Challenge

Social environment challenges refer to differences in culture, food, language and problem while communicating with someone in the society (Taleboo & Baki 2013).

According to Montgomery (2010), English as international language let these international students communicate and get familiar with the new culture. In this case study, the participant from Afghanistan had difficulty in terms of English language. When she arrived in Malaysia, she could not speak in English and communicate properly with professors and Malay people in the community at the beginning as she stated, “low level of English”, her level of English language proficiency was low. This is one of the challenges that this Afghan international student faced while she stays and studies at UiTM because in her home country, Afghanistan, English is a foreign language and the medium of communication is the Dari or Pashto. In addition, Afghan international student had difficulty with Malaysian food as she said, “Malaysia food is different from our country because of that we make food in our room.” Since the taste of Malaysian food is totally distinctive from Afghani food especially it is very spicy, so this international student needs to prepare food in her apartment.

Language limitations add to the difficulties for the new comers (Tseng & Newton, 2002; Lin & Yi, 1997; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). The problem exists when there is an issue with language. The German and Japanese international student in this study experienced a lot language difficulty because their classmate did not really speak English properly. This leads to difficulties while having a discussion as she said “I was in the group; talk to somebody in English and they look at me and they reply in Malaysian, so I don’t understand anything. Then, they talked to their friends and took about 10 minutes and then they translate afterward.” On the other side Japanese students stated, “Most of the student can’t speak English well.” As mentioned by Lui, (2009) ;Yeh & Inose (2002), most of the local student can’t speak English well and this is the common difficulties among international student. Failure to interact with local people may cause cultural shocks and miscommunication which can lead to lack of social support (Chen, 1999). According to the German student, “It is hard to have a male friend because everybody is assumed that you dated him even though it is not true, a lot of assumptions.” The fact is that, it makes the international student always have to be careful during interacting with her male friends to avoid people’s negative assumption.

3.2. Financial related challenge

According to Umar, Noon, Abdullahi (2014), financial challenges are related to “self-sponsorship” in their study on “challenges confronting African students in Malaysia: A case of postgraduate Nigerian students at international Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) Kuala Lumpur.” Umar et al, (2014) found out that one of the serious challenges that international students face in IIUM is financial problem where students thought that like other European countries they are allowed to work and there is job opportunity for them to support themselves financially. In this study, the Afghan international student faced financial challenge in a different way. Basically, Afghan student got a full scholarship to come to Malaysia and study at UiTM based on a contract between Afghanistan Ministry of Higher Education and UiTM but she is not receiving the monthly stipend on time and she does not have a job to help herself financially as she stated, “our government to give the monthly scholarship on time because I don’t have job to support financially.” So, somehow it is like self-sponsorship for her because when she needs money for her living, she spends from her own saving. Moreover, based on the interview with the Indonesian student, she said that “I have to manage my budget from the beginning till the end of this program. Here is more expensive than Indonesia.” Therefore, Finance is a problem because the currency in Malaysia is relatively high compared to Indonesia.

3.3. Facility challenge

Talebloo and Baki (2013) in their study on Challenges Faced by International Postgraduate Students during their First Year of Studies explained that facility challenges are related to “accommodation, transportation, library, campus, and restaurant.” According to Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Mohd (2010), some students have complained that the buses do not run on time. Most of them stated that the buses are not on the time and also there is no fixed schedule. In this study, both Indonesian and German student complain about the transportation. Thus, she needs the buses’ schedule. This Indonesian student said that “Our faculty is far away from this condominium. It gives a problem for me to go to the faculty. Sometimes we need to use Uber application to arrive early to the faculty.” This leads to a challenge for the international students because the transportation causes not to attend classes on the right time. One way to get to the UiTM is using public transportation. According to this German student, it comes to a problem when “sometimes the bus and train are very late and delayed”. This interrupts the time of going to the class on time. She also said that it was also a problem when she did not know what bus or train to take.

3.4. Emotional challenge

According to Hus (2003), an International student is experiencing homesickness due to the far distance from family. In this study, the emotional challenge is referred to separation from family members and community of friends. Among the participants of this research, Afghan and Japanese students believed that when they came to Malaysia they felt homesick. Afghan student missed her family members and friend in Afghanistan. In the context of Afghanistan all immediate family members are living together; therefore, Afghans are used to live together and eat together and when they travel abroad they miss their family and feel lonely. As one of the participants in Umar et al. (2014) study mentioned "Home is home." for Afghan student Afghanistan is home. This psychological emotional challenge happens to most of the international students who live in a collective family and go abroad.

3.5. Academic related challenge

Academic challenges are related to academic difficulties such as education system, teaching methodology, research related projects and professors' behavior that international students confront while they are away from home country and university. As Talebloo and Baki(2013) mentioned the education system in Malaysia in based on research and for those international students who are not familiar with research and process of conducting research it is challenging. The Afghan participant of this case study expressed that she had the same problem. According to her, "I did not know how to do research. I only had my topic." She only had a topic to research on because in Afghanistan the focus is much more on theory and less on practice. Hence, most of the Afghan students do not know how to conduct a research. They are only required to have a bachelor thesis at the end of four years' study and most of the students do it as a literature review, yet a few may have practical research. Since the mode of this Afghan international student' study is by research in Malaysia, so it is frustrating for her to start scientific research. According to Alavi & Mansor (2011), academic difficulties refer to the academic system, lectures, and methodology of teaching in Malaysia. The system in class that is not organized well and not structured giving problems to the international student. This was related to the German female student who said that the lecturers always shift the date of giving a test. Besides that, she also said that, the test is announced one week before, which makes her stressed to get used to. Other than that, Biggs (1990) believes that method of teaching not only provide a 'climate' for learning but also have motivational consequences. The different teaching style in UiTM compared to German university, makes it hard for student to understand on what actually to study and what to do, as she said, "In one subject, the teacher did not give any lecture note, she just said like read some journals, study yourself and then she made the test that is really difficult". Lin and Yi (1997), found that international student also has academic difficulty such as changes in class schedules that are often done by lectures. According to the Japanese female student, in UiTM, the classes are frequently changing by the lecturers as she said: "The time of class here is very flexible and the teachers like changing the timetable frequently". This situation gives difficulty to the Japanese student that she does not know when actually she has the class to go.

3.6. Nature of support

The second research question of this study is to find out the nature of support for these international students. In terms of support, Afghan international student believes that if the monthly stipend is provided by the Afghan government, ministry of higher education, Afghan students will not face with the financial problem anymore. Therefore, she thinks that it is the responsibility of Afghanistan government to help her and other Afghan international students in this regard not to face other challenges relevant to financial one. Second, for overcoming English language and communication difficulty, she said that English bridging course is effective because at the beginning of her arrival in Malaysia she could not talk correctly but after taking English bridging course now she has no problem in terms of oral and written communication as she said, "It enabled me to communicate with my supervisor, friends and now I am able to write my thesis." Regarding emotional and psychological challenge, she declared that going back home and visiting her family members and friends during semester break was the best thing she did to succeed in dealing with homesickness. Another student said that they need "Support from friends, lecture and consultation from lecturer if we have any problem." The University must always hold a program for these students to know their problems and how to solve them. The way how the German student encountered the problem, she said that she needs some time to get used to the challenges. Only she asked to help her in academic part. She hopes that the academic management should take an effort to help her in this regard. Like, the classes, it would be good if it is more organized and more structured. She also said, "I hope that the lecturer can give more content on the class during the lecture".

According to Umar, Noon & Abdullahi (2014), an international student requires support from the university such as transportation to go to class on time. Japanese student needs an effort from university to provide her schedule of the bus, so that she knows what time to go to the class and which bus to take. The last question of the questionnaire was asking regarding advice to other international students coming to UiTM. Firstly, this Afghan international student had a very positive opinion towards UiTM as when this question was asked she said, "I really encourage international students to study in this university because the supervisors are kind and helpful, facilities are excellent like library, labs, and also research room." She clearly stated that she is totally satisfied from what UiTM offered her in term of academic aspects. The only advice that she gave for international students coming to UiTM was to select a topic for their thesis that they are interested in it and based on that find a supervisor who has related background to the main topic of thesis. German student also gave some advice for other students who want to further their studies at UiTM, which is "They should have some information about Muslim; and how they live so that they can respect everything." Hence, they know how to behave in the society and not to face any miscommunication and culture shock.

4. Conclusion

Based on the collected data from Japanese, Indonesian, German, and Afghan female international students, the findings indicate that female International students in UiTM Shah Alam, Malaysia encountered Social environment, financial, facility, emotional and academic challenges. Social environment challenge is found among female international students who are from Germany, Japan and Afghanistan that most of the local student cannot speak English well and this is a challenge that international student face while communicating with them. On the other hand, some international students have low level of English which creates communication problem. Furthermore, Afghan and Indonesian students stated that they have financial problem due to stipend and currency differences between Malaysia and Indonesia. The main challenge with facility is transportation because most of participants mentioned that there is no fixed bus schedule. Other common challenge for female international students who have been interviewed is homesickness because they are far from their family. In addition, classes that are not organized well and not structured giving problems to the international student and it is academic-related challenge that some students faced. This study examines the challenges faced by international female students at UiTM and nature of supports they need. Mainly, these students need their government and current enrolled university's support. In short, information gathered is useful for university management to be better prepared when dealing with the international students.

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