

## **Challenges Faced by International Postgraduate Students during their First Year of Studies**

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### **Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to identify the Challenges Faced by International Postgraduate Students during their first year of studies in university Putra Malaysia. A qualitative method was employed in the study and convenience sampling was applied. Fifteen international postgraduate students from various fields of study were interviewed. The interviews were conducted according to the principles of in-depth interview. A semi-structured interview schedule and tape recorder was used to ensure accuracy of the research. The findings indicated that the challenges faced by the international post-graduate students were classified into four categories. The challenges included problems related to facilities, social environment, academic system and international office programs. The comments made by the students could be considered by the university authorities in order to improve quality of education for international students during the first year of study.*

**Keywords:** Qualitative Method, International Post-Graduate Students, international challenges

### **1. Introduction**

Internationalization of higher education is gaining interest due to various needs of the international communities. Increasing number of universities accepting higher number of international students each year in Malaysian universities shows the importance of the internationalization education in Malaysia. The Malaysian international education sector has grown tremendously during the past decade and Malaysia is fast becoming a center of educational excellence in the region (Ministry of Higher Education, 2009). According to the Ministry of Higher Education, Malaysia is currently ranked 11th in the world by UNESCO in terms of the number of international students studying in the country (Benjamin, 2010). Malaysia is not only accepting international students in undergraduate level, but also a large number of international students is being accepted in post graduate level. A research university and a well reputed one in Malaysia, recorded an increase in international graduate student recruitment with a total of 432 students in the second half of 2011/2012. Accordingly, it is considered as one of the main choice for international students to pursue their studies in this country.

In this study, international students are defined as individuals who temporarily reside in a country other than their country of citizenship in order to participate in international educational exchange as students (Paige, 1990). International students come from different countries with different backgrounds and experience. They have different types of skills and level of English knowledge (Bektas, 2008; Sovic, 2009; Directgov, 2011; C.Lin, 2010). Hence, they are concerned about getting used to new ways of learning and thinking and international students face more difficulties adapting to the new situation. They face various challenges in terms of cultural and communication problems, loss of social support, language difficulties, academic problems, financial, psychological, health and recreational issues (G. Lin & Yi, 1997; Yeh & Inose, 2002; Hus, 2003; Andrade, 2006; Kelly Dawn 2008; Lui, 2009; Sovic, 2009; Zubaidi and Richards, 2009; Sherry, 2010; Alavi & shafeg, 2011).

Marginson, et al (2010) proposes that, English-language proficiency has an important role in student security in English. Lee (1997) and Lin (1997) stated that proficient in English as the most problematic status of academic learning unveil in the academic writing, listening and insufficient vocabulary. In the US for example the main problematic areas faced international students when they first arrive in the US were 1) communication/language; 2) social/cultural; 3) psychological/personal; 4) financial; 5) housing; and 6) food and health areas. (Lu, 2001).

Furthermore the results of studies indicated that, the challenges faced by international students have been categorized by following four categories: (1) general living adjustment, such as adjusting to food, living/housing environment and transportation, dealing with financial problems and health care concerns; (2) academic difficulties, such as lack of proficiency in the English language Method of Teaching Problems (3) socio-cultural difficulties, for example, experiencing culture shock, Recreational Problems (4) personal psychological adjustment, such as experiencing homesickness, loneliness, depression, feeling isolation and worthlessness (Cheng, 1999; Han, 1996; Kaczmarek, Matlock, Merta, Ames, & Ross, 1994; Lin & Yi, 1997; Ying & Liese, 1994; Tseng and Newton, 2002; Norhasni Zainal, 2007; Marie Vafors & Valerie DeMarinis, 2008; Al-Zubaidi and Rechards, 2009; Mustapha, 2010; Alavi & Shafeq 2011).

According to Naidoo (2006) Given the wide variety of universities and countries from which students can choose, universities face challenges caused by an increase in the mobility of students worldwide. Therefore, universities are expected to overcome challenges like cultural diversity, differences in learning styles, changing demands of students provided with greater choice of study destinations, educational programs and study environments. (LeBlanc & Nha, 1997).

Based on literature review, postgraduate international students face different problems. Therefore to attract international students, universities need to understand the challenges faced by international students and to provide the right kind of support. In an attempt to fill this research gap, the main objective of this study is to identify challenges faced by the international post-graduate students during the first year of studies in University of Putra Malaysia. Although several researchers have studied to identify international post-graduate students challenges from the descriptive (mainly quantitatively), yet research needs to address these devices qualitatively. In contrast to previous studies, international post-graduate student's challenges during the first year of study have not been researched qualitatively so far.

The present study seeks to fill the research gap on identify Challenges Faced by International Postgraduate Students during Their First Year of Studies through addressing the following questions:

1. What are the challenges international post-graduate students faced during the first year of studies abroad?
2. What can be done to improve the situation?

## **2. Research methodology**

The study was conducted at University Putra Malaysia (UPM). The participants were fifteen international Post-graduate students, which doing their MS/PhD studies in biotechnology, TESL, educational administration, management engineering and computer sciences and came from Iran, Yemen, and Sudan. Convenience sampling was applied to select the samples. They were selected according to sampling critical cases which was a kind of purposeful sampling and also they were chosen chiefly because the researcher had an easy access to them. Patton (2002) states that qualitative inquiry typically focuses on relatively small samples selected purposefully to permit inquiry into and understanding of a phenomenon in depth. The interviewees were contacted by email. Out of 20 students who were sent an email, fifteen accepted to participate in the interview. When each of the participants agreed to be interviewed, a convenient location was chosen. Each interview took maximum thirty minutes. Having the participants' permission, the interviews were digitally recorded. However one participant did not allow the researcher to record the interview. Ethical approval was obtained from participating UPM's ethics committee. An information sheet and a consent letter were sent to all participants. Transcripts of recordings were prepared, and the information was kept confidential. The main purpose of this study was to provide an in-depth description and understanding of the human life experience (Polit, 2006; Lichtman, 2006).

It was meant to collect direct speech of the people about their experience, opinions, feelings and knowledge (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994; Patton, 1990). Through the process a special kind of information stored in 'in and on someone else's mind' could be collected.

Therefore, the semi-structured, face-to-face interview was applied to collect specific data. (Merriam, 1998).Based on a review of the literature, a set of questions was developed in advance.Before the interviews were conducted, the interview questions were examined by two experts in the field of education and their comments on the each question were taken into account. Then, objective of the study were clarified to the informants and later transcription of the interviews sent to the informants. They confirmed what was transcribed as comments of their own to the interview questions. The reliability of the findings was also strengthened to the scope of study by similarity of responses to the literature pertinent.

### 2.3. Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed and analyzed in relation to the purpose of the study. Dates were coded into categories. The process was carried out inductively that involves examining many small pieces of information and building connection between them. There were then developed based on the code categories.

**Table1.common code categories from international post-graduate challenges**

| ITEMES   | CATEGORIES                   |
|--|------------------------------|
| accommodation, transportation, food, and library               | Facilities                   |
| cultural ,communication and English difficulties               | Social environment           |
| Academic system, lecturers and methodology, faculty supervisor | Academic difficulty          |
| lack of entertaining activities                                | International office program |

### 3. Findings and Discussion

Findings of this research are divided into two parts based on the two research questions. The first part deals with the challenges, while the second discusses the participants' suggestions.

The participants' involved faced 4 main challenges after relocation as an international post graduate students.

#### 3.1. Facilities

Based on the results obtained in this research, one of the challenges faced by the international post-graduate students was about *facilities* which were classified into *accommodation, transportation, food and campus restaurants and library*. Lu (2001) stated that housing and food was the two problematic areas for international students when they arrive in the US. Regarding *Accommodation facilities*, Some Students believed that they are not only inappropriate, unsafe, poor, and inconvenient, but also very expensive. Also, UPM does not provide information about accommodation. The interviewees' comments are mentioned as follows:

One student stated that "I stayed in UPM's *International Housing Complex* only for one week because not only the rent was very high, but also the facilities were so poor. There was no heater and the complex was not conveniently situated. Being located at the end of the academic area, it was very isolated and I did not feel really secure at night." Likewise, Some Students believed that "There are many colleges in the campus but the ones belong to the international students are not clean and they aren't in good condition. Besides, they lack some facilities like warm water and we were not allowed to cook. There are some other guest houses for us. Although they are neat and well-prepared, they are very expensive." According to the results of the study, not enough information is given on accommodation. The majority of students mentioned that "UPM does not provide information about accommodation inside and outside the campus."

The results of the interview also indicate that the students have easy access to *transportation* inside and outside the campus. However, some students have complained that the buses do not run on time. The most of them stated that "The buses did not usually run on time and this was a very big problem especially for those living outside campus." Similarly, another one said that "although the bus services have a station exactly in front of my condominium, sometimes I have to wait for the bus for 1 hour and even more".

This study has also revealed that all the students had a problem with *food and campus restaurants*. In fact they had no idea of where to find suitable food. According to this study these international students were not satisfied with quality, sanitation and taste of Malaysian foods. Their other problem was about the campus restaurants. They believed that there is not enough restaurants and present restaurants are not clean as well. One student mentioned that "Regarding food, I can say that I always tried to cook since our taste is very different from Malaysians .

I tried Malay food a few times during the first months. However, I never liked it and to me it tasted very spicy". Some students believed that "Food was a big problem during the first months in Malaysia." They indicated that the important problem is related to hygienic matters. The foods are not prepared under any supervision and providers don't wear special cloths and gloves to serve food. One student mentioned that "I faced problems with the quality of food that the canteen of my college presents "as well. Students also had some objections about campus restaurants. Some participants stated that: "The quality and sanitation of local restaurants on campus is very low". They believed that campus restaurants are not neat and different animals pass across the tables that decrease the level of cleanliness. All students stated that there are not enough restaurants at the university.

According to the interview all the students are satisfied with the *library facilities* but majority complained about low internet speed. One participant said that: "I will rate UPM library very well. However, there is a problem with the internet speed." Likewise, another one indicated that: "The only problem I encountered which sometimes discouraged me of going to the library was the internet which was awfully slow and limited at times". The majority believed that "They are not really satisfied with library internet speed "as well.

### 3.2. Different Social environment:

According to the results of the study conducted, the students have also faced social environment challenges which in turn are categorized into two main groups: *cultural difficulties, English difficulties and communication problems*. These results match the literature, in which many authors had highlighted the fact that challenging categories of problems among international students are Cultural and Languages Difficulties. (Al-Zubaidi&Rechards, 2009; Lin & Yi, 1997; Yusliza&Chelliah, 2010; Mustapha, 2010; Alavi&Shafeq, 2011). According to Yusliza and Chelliah (2010), adjustments by students fall into two categories: Socio-cultural adjustments are related to behavioral ability to fit in and could be considered from a social learning perspective predicted by variables related to the social skills acquisitions and cognitive factors. Some studies have categorized the challenges facing international students. 1), Social and Curriculum and general living adjustment, 2) socio-cultural adjustment, 3) personal psychological adjustment, and 4) academic adjustment5) Languages Difficulties. (Al-Zubaidi& Richards, 2009; Alavi&Shafeq, 2011)

A problem that the majority of the students in this study faced was the *English accent* of the staff which they did not find comprehensible enough. (Alavi&shafeq, 2011; Lin & Yi, 1997) stated that international students 'may have difficulty adjusting to the various accents of the instructors and understanding class lectures. All students remarked that "At the beginning it was so difficult to understand English in Malaysia, because people speak English with a very different and strange accent which makes them almost incomprehensible. But little by little I got used to their accent". Nevertheless, one student did not face the challenge regarding the accent. Saying "I believe the language is fluent enough on campus meaning that the students hardly find any problems handling their works". Furthermore, only two participants stated that English knowledge of many lecturers during the first year it is not enough. They indicated that "Lack of English skills between UPM's lecturer is the main problem to transfer the ideas to student".

In this research it has also been found that the international students have all had *communication problems* with others during the first year which could be due to the cultural differences. The results show that they are not satisfied with the staff behavior at all. This could partly occur as a result of misunderstanding due to the lack of English knowledge and cultural differences. The result is supported by the literature, in which (Yusliza&Chelliah, 2010) identified two adjustments by students fall into two categories: Socio-cultural adjustments are related to behavioral ability to fit in and can viewed from a social learning perspective predicted by variables related to the social skills acquisitions and cognitive factors. According to Marinis (2008) the same problems among international students when adapting to a new environment are important differences between cultural groups that are missed when classifying this population as one homogenous group.

The some students mentioned that "Communication was also a very big problem. One participant believed that "I can say my English is not bad but I couldn't communicate with staff because many of them couldn't speak English very well and couldn't pronounce the words properly so I had to ask them again and again. It could result in their anger and my disappointment. She also said that "When I entered the university for the first time its beauty attracted me but very soon I became disappointed since it was a very big international university without even one word of English for international students.

I felt I was not welcome because there wasn't anything to show me such idea. All and all in Bahasa and there wasn't anybody to respond my questions. I had to walk a long way to find a person and most often that person didn't know about the faculty or building I was looking for.

Thus, the main problem with a social environment related to English proficiency and communicates with others. This finding supported by Marginson, et al, (2010) study .Moreover, the result shows that there is no guideline for first coming to the university and finds the place, and also you can't find the building and faculty easy as a result of all names in Bahasa. This was mentioned in the literature, (Suseela&Sateen Selan, 2011) who suggested that both academic and non-academic university staff members need to equip themselves with sufficient knowledge of the various backgrounds of international students .The Malaysian higher education sector also needs to streamline its strategy for internationalization with greater improvement on the course, the quality of student services.

### 3.3. Academic Difficulties

The results also indicate that, academic difficulty categories among international students refer to the *academic system, teaching methodology and faculty supervisor*. This is supported by (Al-Zubaidi&Rechards, 2009) who stated that academic difficulty categories among international students refer to the academic system, lecturers and methodology of teaching. Furthermore,Harman and Hayden (2010) find out that, regarding to teach and learning environment challenges the lack of qualifications of academic staff and the poor academic preparation of academic staff for their teacher role was the significant challenges facing higher education in Vietnam.

According to the results, the system of education is more based on practical and research issues than theoretical ones. However, this might be problematic for those lacking a research background. Team work which is observed in most of the classes is a positive feature of the Malaysian education system, making education more efficient. The two students highlighted that "Here, less emphasis is laid on theory and it is very important to put whatever you learn in practice. "Moreover, they believed that "Every lecturer has his/her own discipline and impose that discipline to the students. Mostly, you feel frustrated when you do not know how you can pass a course or obtain great marks. Regarding the learning unfortunately for most of the classes nothing occurs as the lecturers never present as they are suppose and they ask the students themselves to bring materials into the class and discuss. This system is only practical for small-size classes in which the students have enough evidence and capability to handle the academic staff wanted from the class.

"Finally, some students reveal that "The only problem is that lecturer sometimes speaks in Bahasa so we can't understand what they say and it's somehow irritating". Furthermore, the finding illustrated that, there is not significant problems between the international students and faculty supervisor. According to the students report,the main problem with faculty supervisor related to **lack of time, and unclear feedback**. Chests (1997) and Blunt & Li, (1998) point out that, graduate students had a problem with their supervisor in lack of useful feedback, different expectations, lack of time, cultural background and gender-based discrimination. The finding of Adrian and Kimberly, et.al (2007) regarding international graduate students conflict with faculty supervisors indicated that throughout the student quitting, careful discussion and student changing to a new supervisor the conflict was resolved. Five students mentioned that their supervisor does not have enough time for holding a regular meeting .Moreover; three students reported they did not obtain clear feedback from their supervisor. Whereas, some student said that, they do not have a problem with their supervisor; there are respect from them, similarity, other students maintains that they study without any problem with their supervisor they believed that found their supervisor very helpful and encouraging." Based on the interview, some of them illustrated that their conflict with their supervisor were not significant and by the accurate discussion the conflict was eliminated.

### 3.4. International Service Program

*Lack ofentertaining activities and the visa application process* was international post graduate-students challenges which were made by international service during the first year. None of the students are satisfied with the service provided by the International Office. The students are not informed well regarding the events and facilities. Homesickness is a problem that a large number of international students experience while staying away from family and hometown and the interviewees of this research highlighted that *lack ofentertaining activities* was a tangible problem. However, no events are organized to help them overcome the above mentioned problem. All of them believed that the loss of a social support system among international students can have a significant negative influence on the psychological well-being of students, including depression and loneliness.

This is also supported by (Lui, 2009), *lack of entertaining activities* is then an important stress or issue that international students face. They often miss their family, friends or their ethnic cuisine and they daydream of memories back home. The majority of them mentioned that “The international activities such as any gathering or celebrating any country’s particular holidays were either rarely heard or never! They only held a program, rarely; to celebrate a national holiday and the international students who were not very familiar with this cultural event were invited. “Likewise, one study indicates that “I think international office is the part that has the most important burden regarding international students so it should also focus on the problem that all international students face that is homesickness.” Unfortunately there is no attention to this matter and many students get depressed because of lack of attention and programs that help them to pass this hard level. Similarly some interviewees mentioned that Activity programs for international student are very weak. UPM does not spend money for outside camp activities and also cheap trips for international students”.

They don’t respect the students and generally they don’t have good behavior with students. “Another issue that the students are dissatisfied with is that *the visa application process* takes too long and if anyone wants to go back to the country of origin will face many problems. One of them explained that I remember one of my classmates whose father expired and she wanted to go back to her country but her passport was in the international office and when she went to get it back, they said it was not ready. The passport collection was postponed for a week and search in different places to get her passport back. In this field international office is very weak. Thus, the all of them were agreed regarding visa problems. According to (Wang, 2007), the international student services offices are needed much more especially to help students navigate the new rules and regulations relating to immigration, visas, etc. This result also closely reflects statements in the literature, (G. Lin & Yi, 1997; Lu, 2009). Some participant said that they just met the staff once or twice during their first year of studies and that was when they wanted to apply for a visa. They believed that they should be more helpful and responsible. “Moreover, some of them highlighted that the rules and regulations are excellent but the issue is in staffs that lack experience of treating with international students

The second research question, which focused on the international post-graduate students’ additional comments in order to improve quality of education for international students in University Putra Malaysia. The comments made by the students are classified into categories; facilities and academic system. The following comments were proposed:

### 1. Facilities

Regarding sport facilities, a great number of students suggested to have a coach/instructor available on campus to provide more guides and assistance when needed. A couple of students said that although there is a well-equipped clinic at the university, but the doctors are not experts in their job. Furthermore, all of the participants suggested that bus drivers need more supervision because they are sometimes rude to students and are not on time. They believed that while on buses, there are no maps/guidelines to help students find the ways around. One of them indicated that improving on-line facilities for students especially for on campus student should be taken into account.

### 2. Academic system

Some of them explained that changing the **educational system** which forces the lecturers to bring in more information to the class and preparing and training the personnel to more patient and polite are some of useful comments. Moreover, some students suggested that holding workshops for the students to familiarize them with what courses they need to take during their first semesters is another suggestion. One of them believed that Master students need more clarification and instruction on how to do a research. Also he stated that English skills among lecturers, staffs and students needs improvement.

### 4. Conclusions

The aim of this research is to identify the international post-graduate students’ challenges faced during the first year of studies at University of Putra Malaysia and also to elicit their additional comments in order to improve the quality of education for international students in University Putra Malaysia. Based on the results of the interviews conducted in this research, it can be concluded that international students suffer from a variety challenges during their first year of studies more than any other problems. These challenges were reported to be a lack of sufficient facilities, different social environment, academic problems, and lack of international service programs.

Alavi and Shafeq (2011) indicated that the most disturbing categories of problems among international students at UTM are social and recreational problems as well as the curriculum and Method of Teaching Problems. Moreover, the interviewees reported various comments divided into two category group. They comment can be considered by the university authorities so that the international students would feel free of tensions when they begin their new journey in postgraduate studies. The findings are very specific. However, the more significant results can be achieved if the bigger sample and various methodologies will be used. Despite of limitation this study is significant as it finds students' problems and help administrators to be aware of the international students' challenges.

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